

“Unless peace, justice and prosperity prevail...
the independence we won will be meaningless”

ERITREA CONFRONTS ETHIOPIA

Ovi History





An Ovi Magazine Books Publication

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Eritrea Confronts Ethiopia





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On the morning of 24 May 1991, Asmara awoke to a miracle. After three decades of brutal war, the convoys of the Ethiopian Derg were gone, and young fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) walked unarmed through cheering crowds. It was the day of The Long Ascent: From Guerrilla Cell to Capital Liberators, a victory won not merely by firepower but by a patient, unforgiving crawl through mountain redoubts and clandestine cells. Yet even as celebrants draped flags from balconies, the seeds of a harder story were being sown.

For the Derg, this was The Unravelling: How Internal Collapse in Ethiopia Paved the Way. Famine, losses on the northern front, and a regime eating itself from within had cleared the road to Asmara. But

the EPLF did not simply stroll into power. Overnight, the front transformed into a provisional government, issuing orders, securing ministries, and controlling a population elated by De Facto Independence Overnight. Two years later, a UN-supervised referendum produced a result of 99.9% for sovereignty, a vote so lopsided that many called it The Referendum Trap: Self-Determination as a Double-Edged Sword. Was it genuine liberation, or the ritual ratification of a military fait accompli?

For a brief moment, hope was plausible. Eritrea had won the world's sympathy. Then came The Heroic Narrative vs. The Authoritarian Reality. The same clandestine discipline that defeated the Derg became peacetime command. The liberation front became the sole ruling party; the guerrilla commander, Isaias Afwerki, became president and never left. From Liberation Front to Ruling Party was not a transition but a continuation.

Nowhere did this sting more than in Asmara's Silent Streets. The same avenues that rang with freedom songs grew quiet. A mandatory national service programme, sold as patriotic duty, became indefinite conscription, a slow bleed of the young to desertion, to exile, and to the bottom of the Mediterranean. The

generation that danced in May 1991 now sends its children across borders in leaky boats.

Regionally, independence reshaped the Horn. A New Border, An Old Wound amputated Ethiopia from its coastline, poisoning relations and igniting the 1998–2000 war. Red Sea Ripple Effects followed: alliances with Sudan's rebels, isolation from Djibouti, and a garrison-state mentality that alienated former friends.

This book does not dismiss the miracle of 1991. The Derg was a monstrous regime, and its defeat was just. But the lesson of Eritrea, one that modern secessionist movements ignore at their peril, is that When Guerrillas Win, The Perils of Turning a Liberation Army into a Government are swift and absolute. Military victory does not beget democracy. Self-determination can free a nation from an empire only to cage it within a barracks.

This is the story of that birth, and of what followed. A victory lap turned into a long march into silence.



The long ascent

In May 1991, fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front entered Asmara after one of the longest and most disciplined liberation wars in modern African history. For many Eritreans, the moment represented not merely military victory but the end of a generational ordeal defined by occupation, aerial bombardment, famine, exile, and relentless sacrifice. To others, particularly in neighbouring Ethiopia, it marked the fragmentation of an empire that successive Ethiopian governments had fought desperately to preserve.

The armed struggle that culminated in the fall of Asmara did not emerge suddenly. It evolved across

three decades, shaped by ideological battles, regional rivalries, Cold War geopolitics, and brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. The story of the EPLF is therefore not simply a tale of battlefield victories. It is also a study in endurance, political organisation, and strategic adaptation.

The road to May 1991 began long before the world noticed Eritrea.

Following the defeat of Fascist Italy in the Second World War, Eritrea became a contested territory. Italy had ruled the colony since the late nineteenth century, developing ports, railways, and an urban economy that distinguished Eritrea from much of the surrounding region. After the war, however, Britain administered the territory while the international community debated its future.

In 1952, the United Nations established a federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie. Eritrea retained a parliament and limited autonomy, at least on paper. In practice, Addis Ababa steadily dismantled Eritrean self-government. Eritrean political parties were suppressed, trade unions harassed, and Arabic and Tigrinya marginalised in favour of Amharic.

By 1962, Haile Selassie formally annexed Eritrea as a province of Ethiopia. For many Eritreans, the annexation extinguished hopes of constitutional co-existence. Armed resistance increasingly appeared inevitable.

The first organised resistance movement emerged through the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded largely by exiles, students, and Muslim lowland activists. On 1 September 1961, Hamid Idris Awate fired what is often regarded as the opening shots of the Eritrean armed struggle.

At first, the insurgency was fragile. Fighters possessed few weapons and relied heavily on rural support networks. Ethiopian forces, backed by the United States during the Cold War, appeared vastly superior. Yet the ELF slowly expanded across western and northern Eritrea.

The movement, however, suffered from deep internal divisions. Regionalism, ideological fragmentation, and sectarian mistrust weakened cohesion. Younger fighters increasingly criticised the ELF leadership as conservative, ineffective, and authoritarian. Out of these tensions emerged a new generation of revolutionaries who would eventually form the EPLF.

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front formally consolidated during the 1970s after several break-away factions united. Unlike the ELF, the EPLF developed a highly disciplined political and military structure. It emphasised self-reliance, ideological education, and centralised command.

The movement established underground schools, medical services, and administrative systems in liberated areas. Women served not merely as auxiliaries but as fighters, commanders, medics, and political organisers. This became one of the defining features of the EPLF and contributed to its image as a socially transformative movement rather than a purely nationalist militia.

Its base area around Sahel Region became legendary among supporters. Hidden among harsh mountains and caves, the EPLF created a wartime society capable of surviving prolonged siege conditions. Workshops manufactured ammunition and repaired captured weapons. Hospitals operated underground. Political cadres travelled constantly to maintain morale and discipline.

The organisation understood early that survival depended not only on combat effectiveness but also on legitimacy among civilians.

The overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 transformed the conflict dramatically. A Marxist military junta known as the Derg seized power in Ethiopia under the eventual leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Initially, some Eritrean revolutionaries hoped the new regime might negotiate self-determination. Instead, the Derg intensified the war.

The conflict now became entangled with Cold War politics. The Soviet Union shifted its support from Somalia to Ethiopia, providing Addis Ababa with enormous quantities of tanks, aircraft, artillery, and military advisers. Cuban troops and Eastern Bloc assistance further strengthened Ethiopian capabilities.

By the late 1970s, Ethiopia possessed one of the largest armies in Africa.

For the EPLF, survival appeared uncertain.

Between 1977 and 1978, the EPLF experienced one of the gravest crises in its history. Ethiopian forces launched massive Soviet-backed offensives designed to annihilate Eritrean resistance once and for all.

The Ethiopians recaptured major towns and drove EPLF fighters back into the Sahel mountains. Na-

palm, cluster munitions, and aerial bombardment devastated villages suspected of aiding the insurgency. Civilians fled in huge numbers.

Many liberation movements might have collapsed under such pressure. The EPLF instead adapted. Rather than defending territory conventionally, it reverted to elastic guerrilla warfare, preserving manpower while stretching Ethiopian supply lines.

This period forged the EPLF's reputation for discipline and resilience. Fighters endured starvation, isolation, and constant attack, yet the movement survived.

That survival became the first great turning point of the war.

Had the EPLF been destroyed in 1978, Eritrean independence would likely have vanished with it.

The town of Nakfa became the symbolic heart of Eritrean resistance. Repeated Ethiopian offensives attempted to crush EPLF positions there during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The battles around Nakfa resembled a war of attrition. Ethiopian commanders relied on overwhelming firepower and repeated frontal assaults. The EPLF re-

lied on tunnels, mobility, camouflage, and intimate knowledge of the terrain.

Nakfa acquired near-mythic status among Eritreans. The movement's ability to hold out against repeated offensives convinced many civilians that ultimate victory was possible.

Crucially, the EPLF also learned to wage a political war alongside its military struggle. Captured Ethiopian soldiers were often treated more humanely than expected, a deliberate strategy intended to undermine enemy morale and strengthen the movement's international image.

Meanwhile, the rival ELF steadily declined, weakened by internal fragmentation and military defeat. By the early 1980s, the EPLF had become the dominant Eritrean liberation force.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the EPLF struggle was its effort to construct institutions before achieving independence.

In liberated zones, the movement organised literacy campaigns, rudimentary courts, agricultural programmes, and health services. Women's participation challenged deeply rooted patriarchal norms.

Political education stressed sacrifice, discipline, and collective identity.

Critics would later argue that this culture also encouraged excessive centralisation and intolerance of dissent. Those criticisms deserve serious consideration. The EPLF's wartime structure left little room for pluralism, and the habits formed during prolonged conflict would shape Eritrea's post-independence political trajectory.

Yet during the war itself, these systems gave the movement extraordinary cohesion. Unlike many insurgencies fractured by corruption or warlordism, the EPLF maintained organisational unity over decades.

That unity became decisive in the final phase of the conflict.

If Nakfa symbolised survival, the Battle of Afabet represented strategic transformation.

In March 1988, EPLF forces launched a massive offensive against Ethiopian positions around Afabet. The Ethiopian Nadew Command, one of the regime's largest military formations in Eritrea, collapsed catastrophically.

Thousands of Ethiopian troops were killed, captured, or routed. Huge quantities of Soviet-supplied weaponry fell into EPLF hands. Ethiopian commanders reportedly destroyed parts of their own retreating forces to prevent equipment capture.

Afabet shattered the perception of Ethiopian invincibility.

More importantly, it demonstrated that the EPLF had evolved beyond guerrilla warfare into a highly capable conventional fighting force. The movement could now coordinate large-scale offensives involving armour, artillery, and mobile operations.

After Afabet, momentum shifted irreversibly.

The Ethiopian state remained powerful, but it was no longer clearly capable of winning the war.

By the late 1980s, the Derg faced crises on multiple fronts. Economic collapse, famine, military exhaustion, and declining Soviet support undermined the regime.

The reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev altered Moscow's foreign policy priorities. The Soviet Union increasingly reduced costly overseas commitments.

Ethiopia could no longer rely indefinitely on limitless military backing.

At the same time, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) gained strength inside northern Ethiopia. The EPLF and TPLF developed a pragmatic alliance against the Derg despite differing long-term objectives.

This cooperation proved strategically devastating for Addis Ababa.

The Ethiopian military now faced coordinated insurgencies across vast territories while suffering from collapsing morale and shrinking external support.

In February 1990, the EPLF launched Operation Fenkil against the vital Red Sea port of Massawa.

The operation demonstrated the extraordinary evolution of EPLF military capability. Fighters attacked from land and sea using improvised naval tactics alongside mechanised ground assaults.

After fierce combat, the EPLF captured the city.

The fall of Massawa was a devastating blow to the Ethiopian regime. It deprived Addis Ababa of a critical port and further isolated remaining Ethiopian

garrisons in Eritrea. Ethiopian air raids subsequently inflicted severe destruction on the city, causing substantial civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, the strategic balance had shifted decisively.

The EPLF was no longer merely resisting occupation. It was dismantling it.

By early 1991, the Ethiopian state was collapsing rapidly. Rebel advances intensified across the country. The TPLF-led coalition moved southward towards Addis Ababa while the EPLF tightened its grip over Eritrea.

Ethiopian units in Eritrea suffered from low morale, isolation, and logistical breakdown. Many soldiers were exhausted by years of war and increasingly unwilling to continue fighting for a dying regime.

The EPLF advanced methodically rather than recklessly. Decades of experience had taught its commanders the dangers of overextension. Strategic patience remained one of the movement's defining characteristics.

Asmara itself carried immense symbolic weight. It was not merely a military objective but the political

and psychological centre of Ethiopian authority in Eritrea.

When Ethiopian control finally unravelled in May 1991, the outcome felt both sudden and inevitable.

On 24 May 1991, EPLF fighters entered Asmara.

Images from the period show jubilant crowds lining the streets, embracing exhausted fighters who had spent years in mountains, trenches, and desert battlefields. For many Eritreans, the moment embodied vindication after decades of suffering.

Yet the entry into Asmara was notable for another reason: relative restraint.

Unlike many victorious revolutionary armies, the EPLF sought to project discipline and order rather than uncontrolled triumphalism. Government institutions, infrastructure, and public services were secured quickly. Foreign observers noted the movement's organisational efficiency.

This mattered enormously. Liberation movements often struggle during the transition from insurgency to governance. The EPLF wanted to demonstrate that it was capable not only of winning wars but of administering a state.

Three decades after the first shots of the rebellion, Eritrean independence had effectively been achieved.

Formal international recognition would follow after a 1993 referendum in which Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence.

The simplest explanation for EPLF victory is military persistence, but that alone is insufficient.

The movement succeeded because it combined several rare qualities simultaneously.

First, it maintained organisational cohesion over decades despite extraordinary hardship. Internal disputes existed, sometimes violently, but the movement avoided the chronic fragmentation that crippled many insurgencies.

Second, it mastered adaptation. The EPLF evolved from lightly armed guerrilla bands into a sophisticated hybrid force capable of conventional warfare.

Third, it embedded itself socially. The struggle became inseparable from civilian endurance. Villagers, refugees, medics, teachers, and underground organisers formed part of the resistance ecosystem.

Fourth, the Ethiopian state made catastrophic strategic errors. Successive regimes underestimated Eritrean nationalism and relied excessively on coercion. Indiscriminate violence often strengthened rather than weakened resistance.

Finally, timing mattered. The end of the Cold War deprived the Derg of crucial Soviet backing precisely when rebel forces across Ethiopia were gaining momentum.

It is tempting to end the story in May 1991 with uncomplicated celebration. Yet history rarely permits such simplicity.

The EPLF achieved one of Africa's most remarkable liberation victories, but liberation movements are not frozen in time. The qualities that make insurgencies effective in war can become problematic in peace.

Centralised authority, ideological rigidity, and militarised political culture helped the EPLF survive existential conflict. Those same characteristics later shaped the political order of independent Eritrea in deeply controversial ways.

Still, none of this erases the magnitude of what the

movement accomplished during the armed struggle itself.

For thirty years, against an adversary backed at different times by the United States and the Soviet Union, the EPLF endured, adapted, and ultimately prevailed. Few liberation movements in modern history sustained such a prolonged campaign while retaining strategic coherence.

The entry into Asmara in May 1991 was therefore more than the fall of a city. It was the culmination of a generational revolution forged through attrition, discipline, and relentless belief that even the most entrenched power could eventually be defeated.

Whether viewed as heroic liberation, revolutionary triumph, or the beginning of a more complicated national story, the EPLF's long ascent remains one of the defining military and political struggles of twentieth-century Africa.



The Derg's unravelling

The fall of Ethiopia's Derg regime in 1991 is often remembered as the triumphant culmination of Eritrea's thirty-year war for independence. In many historical narratives, the military prowess and discipline of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) dominate the story, while the collapse of the Ethiopian state is treated as a secondary development. Yet the victory of the EPLF cannot be fully understood without examining the profound political, economic and military decay inside Ethiopia itself. The Derg did not merely lose a war on the battlefield; it imploded from within.

By the late 1980s, the Ethiopian regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam was exhausted by famine, paralysed by economic ruin, consumed by multiple

insurgencies and increasingly abandoned by its international allies. The northern fronts collapsed not because the Ethiopian military lacked numbers or weapons, but because the state sustaining that military had become hollow. The EPLF's victory was therefore as much a consequence of the Derg's internal disintegration as it was of Eritrean resistance.

When Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, many Ethiopians initially believed the military junta known as the Derg might modernise the country and address longstanding inequalities. Instead, the regime rapidly transformed Ethiopia into one of Africa's most militarised and authoritarian states.

Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the dominant figure after violent internal purges and launched a Marxist-Leninist state closely aligned with the Soviet Union. Land reform and nationalisation were presented as revolutionary achievements, but the regime increasingly relied on coercion rather than legitimacy. Political opposition was crushed during the "Red Terror" of the late 1970s, in which thousands of students, activists and suspected dissidents were killed.

The Derg governed through fear, surveillance and force. This approach may have secured short-term control over the Ethiopian heartland, but it deep-

ened alienation in the country's peripheral regions, especially Eritrea and Tigray. Rather than integrating these regions politically, the regime treated dissent as treason and answered demands for autonomy with overwhelming military violence.

This was a catastrophic strategic mistake. Ethiopia was not fighting a single insurgency; it was attempting to suppress several liberation movements simultaneously across an enormous and diverse territory. The Derg's insistence on solving political crises through military means drained the state of resources and ultimately weakened the very institutions it depended upon.

Eritrea represented a unique challenge for successive Ethiopian governments. Federated with Ethiopia in 1952 and formally annexed in 1962, Eritrea possessed a distinct colonial history, administrative structure and growing nationalist movement. By the time the Derg came to power, Eritrean resistance had already been underway for more than a decade.

The EPLF emerged during the 1970s as a highly organised and ideologically disciplined movement. Unlike many insurgent groups of the period, it combined military strategy with political mobilisation, education, healthcare and local administration in

areas under its control. It gradually outmanoeuvred rival Eritrean factions and established itself as the dominant liberation force.

The Derg consistently underestimated the EPLF. Ethiopian commanders often assumed superior firepower would eventually crush the insurgency. Massive offensives were launched repeatedly throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, supported by Soviet advisers, tanks and aircraft. Yet the EPLF adapted effectively to guerrilla warfare and understood the terrain far better than the Ethiopian army.

More importantly, the Ethiopian military could win battles without winning legitimacy. Villages destroyed by aerial bombardment and civilians displaced by counterinsurgency campaigns only deepened hostility towards Addis Ababa. Every failed offensive increased the sense that the war was unwinnable.

The Battle of Afabet in 1988 marked a decisive turning point. The EPLF destroyed a major Ethiopian command position and captured vast quantities of military equipment. The defeat shattered the myth of Ethiopian military superiority. It demonstrated that the Derg was no longer merely struggling to

contain insurgents; it was losing control of the north altogether.

No issue exposed the Derg's incompetence and brutality more clearly than the famine of the 1980s. Although drought played a role, the catastrophe was fundamentally political. Government policies, forced resettlement schemes and military priorities dramatically worsened the crisis.

The regime diverted enormous resources towards warfare while rural communities faced starvation. Agricultural production collapsed in many conflict zones, and aid deliveries were frequently manipulated for political purposes. Areas suspected of supporting insurgents often received inadequate assistance or were subjected to harsh restrictions.

The international image of Ethiopia during this period became inseparable from famine. Images of starving children broadcast worldwide in 1984 and 1985 shocked global audiences and prompted unprecedented humanitarian campaigns. Yet these images also undermined the Derg's claims of revolutionary competence.

For many Ethiopians, famine was not simply a natural disaster; it was evidence that the state had failed

in its most basic responsibilities. The government appeared more capable of mobilising soldiers than feeding citizens. Forced resettlement programmes, presented as relief measures, were widely viewed as coercive and deadly.

The famine also weakened the military indirectly. Conscription became increasingly unpopular as families struggled for survival. Morale deteriorated among soldiers who witnessed widespread suffering and corruption. Economic collapse reduced the state's ability to sustain prolonged warfare.

Crucially, the famine damaged Ethiopia's international standing. Although Cold War dynamics initially shielded the regime from severe criticism, growing awareness of the humanitarian disaster tarnished Mengistu's legitimacy abroad. The image of a Marxist government presiding over mass starvation became politically toxic.

Wars are expensive, and the Derg fought too many for too long. By the late 1980s, Ethiopia's economy was buckling under the weight of continuous militarisation.

Huge portions of the national budget were directed towards defence spending. Soviet arms shipments

temporarily sustained the regime's military machine, but they could not solve structural economic problems. Infrastructure deteriorated, agricultural output stagnated and industrial growth remained weak.

The command economy imposed by the regime further aggravated inefficiency. State control over production and distribution created shortages, discouraged innovation and encouraged black markets. Corruption spread through the bureaucracy and military alike.

At the same time, Ethiopia's population was growing rapidly, placing additional pressure on limited resources. Urban unemployment increased, while rural communities suffered from land degradation and displacement caused by conflict.

The Derg increasingly resembled a state at war with its own society. Rather than generating loyalty, its economic policies produced frustration and resentment. Citizens endured rationing, inflation and forced recruitment while the political elite maintained rigid ideological control.

The regime's dependence on Soviet support also became a fatal vulnerability. Once Moscow began reducing foreign commitments under Mikhail Gor-

bachev's reforms, Ethiopia's strategic position weakened dramatically. The Derg had built its survival around external backing, and when that backing diminished, the fragility of the state became obvious.

The collapse of the northern fronts was perhaps the clearest sign that the Derg was nearing its end. Eritrea and Tigray became interconnected theatres of resistance, with the EPLF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) increasingly coordinating against Addis Ababa.

The Ethiopian military remained enormous on paper, but size concealed severe internal problems. Many soldiers were poorly motivated conscripts. Desertions increased as defeats mounted. Supply lines stretched across hostile territory became vulnerable to guerrilla attacks.

The EPLF and TPLF, by contrast, benefited from mobility, local support and political cohesion. They understood that they did not need to destroy the Ethiopian army outright; they only needed to make continued occupation impossible.

The Derg's strategy relied heavily on conventional warfare, including large offensives supported by armour and airpower. But such methods proved inef-

fective against decentralised insurgencies capable of retreating, regrouping and striking unexpectedly.

As northern strongholds fell one after another, the psychological impact on the regime was devastating. Military defeats exposed the weakening authority of the central government and encouraged broader opposition movements.

The fall of Massawa in 1990 was particularly significant. The capture of this strategic port by the EPLF deprived Ethiopia of a critical logistical and economic asset. It also symbolised the irreversible erosion of state control in Eritrea.

By this stage, the Derg was no longer dictating events. It was reacting desperately to crises on multiple fronts, unable to regain the initiative.

Cold War geopolitics played a decisive role in sustaining the Derg for much of its existence. Soviet military aid transformed Ethiopia into one of the most heavily armed states in Africa during the late 1970s and 1980s.

Without Soviet support, the regime would likely have collapsed far earlier. Cuban troops, Eastern Bloc advisers and massive weapons transfers enabled

Ethiopia to survive the Ogaden War against Somalia and continue campaigns against internal insurgencies.

Yet this support created dangerous dependency. The Derg became accustomed to external rescue rather than internal reform.

When the Soviet Union entered its own period of crisis under Gorbachev, priorities shifted. Moscow sought to reduce costly foreign entanglements and improve relations with the West. Ideological allies who could not sustain themselves became liabilities rather than assets.

Mengistu failed to adapt to this changing reality. Even as Soviet aid declined, the regime remained committed to military solutions and rigid authoritarianism. Attempts at limited reform came too late and lacked credibility.

The loss of Soviet backing accelerated military collapse. Spare parts, ammunition and financial support became increasingly scarce. More importantly, the regime lost the geopolitical confidence that had sustained it for years.

The EPLF and allied insurgent groups recognised

this shift immediately. They understood that time was now on their side.

It is impossible to separate the Derg's collapse from the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam himself. His rule was defined by paranoia, brutality and ideological rigidity.

Mengistu believed force could solve virtually every political problem. Opposition was rarely negotiated with and almost never understood on its own terms. Regional grievances were dismissed as counter-revolutionary threats rather than symptoms of systemic failure.

This mindset prevented meaningful compromise. The regime alienated potential allies through repression and created cycles of resistance that intensified over time.

Mengistu also cultivated a political culture centred on loyalty rather than competence. Fear dominated decision-making within the state apparatus. Military commanders were often reluctant to report failures honestly, contributing to strategic miscalculations.

As conditions deteriorated, the regime became increasingly disconnected from ordinary Ethiopi-

ans. Propaganda celebrating socialist achievements contrasted absurdly with the realities of famine, displacement and military defeat.

When Mengistu fled Ethiopia in May 1991, it symbolised the final collapse of a regime that had lost both legitimacy and control. His departure was not simply the end of a government; it was the implosion of an entire political system.

The EPLF's victory in Eritrea was undoubtedly a remarkable military and political achievement. Its organisational discipline, strategic patience and ability to mobilise local support were central to its success. Yet celebrating the EPLF alone risks oversimplifying history.

The Derg collapsed because it attempted to govern a deeply diverse country through militarisation and coercion while ignoring economic reality and political legitimacy. Famine exposed its moral bankruptcy. Endless wars exhausted its resources. The loss of Soviet backing removed its external lifeline. Military defeats in the north revealed the state's growing fragility.

By the time the EPLF entered Asmara in 1991, the

Ethiopian regime was already collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions.

This history carries broader lessons about the limits of authoritarian power. States can possess vast armies, powerful allies and rigid ideological structures, yet still fail when they lose legitimacy among their own people. Military force may suppress dissent temporarily, but it cannot indefinitely replace political inclusion, economic stability and accountable governance.

The Derg's downfall was therefore not sudden or accidental. It was the cumulative result of years of political arrogance, strategic miscalculation and human suffering. The EPLF did not merely defeat Ethiopia militarily; it outlasted a regime that had already begun destroying itself.



Asmara, May 1991

The day the celebrations began

There are moments in history when a city seems to exhale.

In May 1991, Asmara did exactly that.

For thirty years, Eritreans had lived through one of Africa's longest and most brutal wars. Entire generations grew up knowing conscription, bombardment, famine, disappearances and funerals as ordinary parts of life. Villages were erased. Families split across borders. Children learned to distinguish aircraft by sound before they learned algebra. Yet when the fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front entered Asmara in May 1991, the defining image was

not vengeance, nor chaos, nor triumphant bloodshed.

It was restraint. And that restraint mattered. Too often, wars end in orgies of revenge. Capitals fall amid looting, executions and score-settling. History teaches civilians to fear the arrival of armed men, regardless of whose flag they carry. But the entry of the EPLF into Asmara became something else: an extraordinary moment in which a battered people appeared determined not merely to win a war, but to reclaim their dignity.

To understand why the celebrations felt almost unreal, one must first remember the nightmare that preceded them.

The Eritrean struggle against Ethiopia began in 1961, long before much of the world paid attention. Eritrea, once an Italian colony and later federated with Ethiopia under an arrangement backed by the United Nations, saw its autonomy steadily dismantled by Emperor Haile Selassie. When Eritrea was formally annexed in 1962, armed resistance intensified.

What followed was catastrophic. Under the Derg military regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, the

war escalated into industrial-scale brutality. Soviet-backed Ethiopian offensives rained artillery and napalm onto Eritrean towns and rural communities alike. Entire regions became militarised wastelands. Civilians vanished into prisons. Thousands fled across deserts into Sudan. Food became a weapon. Fear became permanent.

The Ethiopian army, particularly during the late 1970s and 1980s, developed a fearsome reputation among Eritrean civilians. Survivors spoke of executions in marketplaces, arbitrary arrests and collective punishment against villages suspected of aiding guerrillas. The war was not merely fought on front lines; it seeped into kitchens, schools and churches.

And yet the resistance endured. The EPLF emerged as the dominant liberation movement not simply because it fought effectively, but because it built an image of discipline and organisation. In the barren mountains around Nakfa, fighters established clinics, schools, workshops and underground hospitals. Women served not only as nurses and cooks but as armed combatants and commanders. The movement cultivated a mythology of sacrifice and self-reliance that became central to Eritrean identity.

By the late 1980s, the tide had turned decisively.

The Soviet Union was weakening. Mengistu's government was collapsing under the pressure of multiple insurgencies. The EPLF's victory at the Battle of Afabet in 1988 shattered Ethiopian military prestige in Eritrea. Government troops increasingly looked exhausted, demoralised and isolated.

Still, nobody in Asmara could be entirely certain what the end would look like.

Would the capital become another battlefield? Would retreating forces destroy the city? Would there be massacres?

These were not irrational fears. They were logical expectations born from decades of horror. Eyewitness accounts from those final days often describe something uncanny: silence.

Not complete silence, of course. War never ends tidily. There were sporadic gunshots, rumours, hurried departures and nervous whispers passing through neighbourhoods. Ethiopian officials fled. Soldiers abandoned posts. Families peered through shutters. Radios crackled with contradictory reports.

But what many remember most vividly is the sudden absence of terror. For years, the city had existed beneath the psychological weight of military occupation. Checkpoints, surveillance and the ever-present threat of detention formed part of daily life. Then, almost overnight, that machinery began to dissolve.

People waited cautiously. Some expected a trap. Others feared aerial bombardment from desperate remnants of the Ethiopian regime. Parents warned children to stay indoors. Shopkeepers hesitated to reopen. Priests prayed publicly for calm.

Then came the fighters. Not as a raging mob, but in dusty convoys. Young men and women entered the capital wearing worn sandals, carrying Kalashnikovs and draped in exhaustion more than glory. Many had spent years in mountain trenches. Some were visibly underfed. Yet witnesses repeatedly recall their discipline.

There was no widespread looting. No systematic revenge killings. No drunken rampage.

In a continent too often patronisingly portrayed through the lens of coups and chaos, the orderly entry into Asmara stood as a profound rebuke to lazy assumptions about African liberation movements.

The EPLF leadership understood that military victory could easily be morally squandered. They behaved accordingly.

Civilians poured into the streets. Women ululated from balconies. Children climbed onto vehicles. Old men wept openly. Strangers embraced. The city erupted not with panic, but with relief.

The jubilation of May 1991 was not naïve optimism. It was emotional release after cumulative trauma.

One must imagine what liberation meant to ordinary Eritreans at that moment. It meant the possibility that sons would no longer disappear into military prisons. It meant perhaps sleeping without fear of midnight arrests. It meant perhaps travelling roads without encountering burned-out tanks and corpses. It meant perhaps no more letters announcing another dead relative.

In many liberation narratives, victory is romanticised. In Eritrea's case, the joy in Asmara felt less romantic than profoundly weary. People celebrated because they had survived.

Eyewitnesses often describe scenes of surreal normality returning almost instantly. Cafés reopened.

Music emerged from houses that had long remained subdued. Families walked late into the evening. Neighbours who had avoided political conversation for years suddenly spoke freely in public.

There was also astonishment at the physical condition of the fighters themselves. The EPLF had become legendary in the Eritrean imagination, yet many civilians encountered not mythic warriors but gaunt young people hardened by deprivation. Their arrival collapsed the distance between heroic symbolism and human reality.

The celebrations therefore carried an intimacy absent from many revolutions. This was not merely an army entering a conquered city. It was cousins, daughters, former classmates and missing sons returning home.

Three decades later, discussions about Eritrea are inevitably overshadowed by the authoritarian trajectory the country later took under Isaias Afwerki, the EPLF leader who became president after independence. That later history is real and important. It cannot be ignored.

But it should not erase the significance of May 1991. Historical honesty demands nuance. The peaceful

entry into Asmara was genuine. The emotional unity felt by many Eritreans was genuine. The discipline displayed by EPLF fighters was genuine.

Too often, retrospective disappointment encourages people to flatten history into inevitability, as though liberation movements were always destined to become authoritarian governments. History does not work like that. Moments contain possibilities. May 1991 contained many.

For a brief time, Asmara embodied the dream that a traumatised society could emerge from war with dignity intact. That dream mattered even if later realities complicated it.

The conduct of the EPLF in entering the city also demonstrated an often-overlooked truth: discipline in victory is one of the rarest achievements in warfare. It is easier to fight an enemy than to restrain hatred after decades of suffering. Eritreans had ample reason for revenge. Many had lost relatives to bombings, executions and imprisonment. Yet the transition in Asmara remained remarkably controlled compared with countless other collapsing regimes across the twentieth century. That fact deserves recognition.

Today, memories of those days remain intensely vivid among Eritreans who witnessed them. People

remember specific sounds: cheering crowds, revolutionary songs, church bells. They remember smells: diesel fumes from military vehicles mixed with coffee brewing in reopened homes.

They remember visual fragments: fighters sleeping on pavements from exhaustion, women waving flags from rooftops, elderly civilians touching guerrillas' shoulders as if confirming they were real.

And above all, they remember emotion. Not abstract nationalism, but a deep and overwhelming sense that history had finally shifted.

For outsiders, liberation dates often become sterile textbook entries. But cities remember differently. Streets remember differently. Human beings remember differently.

Asmara in May 1991 was not merely witnessing the fall of one regime. It was witnessing the end of an era of fear that had consumed an entire generation.

The celebrations began because, for the first time in decades, people could imagine a future larger than survival. That is why the memory endures.



De facto independence overnight

In May 1991, as the guns fell silent across Eritrea, one of the most remarkable state-building exercises in modern African history began almost immediately. There was no internationally supervised referendum yet. There was no formal declaration recognised by the United Nations. Eritrea, in strict legal terms, remained part of Ethiopia. Yet on the ground, power had already changed hands completely.

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front did not merely win a war. It stepped seamlessly into the role of a functioning state. Roads were policed, ports were managed, ministries appeared almost overnight, tax-

es were collected, schools reopened, and foreign diplomats quietly began treating the movement as the legitimate authority in Eritrea long before formal independence arrived in 1993.

This transformation did not happen by accident. It was the result of decades of preparation by a highly disciplined liberation movement led by Isaias Afwerki, who understood that military victory alone would mean little without administrative control. The speed with which the EPLF consolidated power after the collapse of the Ethiopian military regime remains one of the clearest examples of a guerrilla army converting itself into a government almost overnight.

By the late 1980s, the Ethiopian state under Mengistu Haile Mariam was already crumbling. The Soviet Union, long the regime's principal backer, was weakening and eventually withdrawing support. Ethiopia's army, once one of the largest in Africa, suffered catastrophic defeats in Eritrea.

The decisive moment came with the Battle of Afabet in 1988, where EPLF forces shattered a major Ethiopian command structure. From that point onward, the Ethiopian military presence in Eritrea steadily deteriorated. By May 1991, the EPLF entered

Asmara with relatively little resistance as government authority collapsed.

Yet what followed distinguished the EPLF from many insurgent movements elsewhere. There was no prolonged power vacuum. No major wave of revenge killings overtook the capital. No competing militias emerged to divide the territory. Instead, the movement rapidly imposed order with extraordinary efficiency.

That outcome was possible because the EPLF had spent years constructing the skeleton of a future state in territories it already controlled during the war.

Unlike many guerrilla organisations that function solely as military entities, the EPLF had long operated as a quasi-state in rural Eritrea. In liberated zones, it established courts, schools, agricultural programmes, medical clinics, and local administrative committees.

This wartime governance became a rehearsal for sovereignty. The movement developed bureaucratic habits unusual for a revolutionary army. It maintained records, enforced internal discipline, regulated commerce, and even managed rudimentary taxation systems. Its leadership promoted self-reliance

obsessively, partly because external support was inconsistent and partly because dependence on foreign powers was viewed as politically dangerous.

By the time Ethiopian rule collapsed, the EPLF already possessed many of the institutions required to govern a country. What looked to outside observers like an overnight transition had in reality been prepared over decades in mountain bases, underground hospitals, and makeshift administrative centres.

The movement's organisational culture also mattered enormously. The EPLF was hierarchical, centralised, and ideologically cohesive. Internal dissent was tightly controlled. Critics would later argue that this culture laid the foundations for authoritarianism, but in 1991 it provided the discipline needed to prevent chaos during transition.

One of the EPLF's first priorities after taking Asmara was establishing visible order. Fighters were instructed to avoid widespread looting and arbitrary violence. Key infrastructure was immediately secured: airports, communications facilities, fuel depots, ports, and government buildings.

This was not merely symbolic. It sent a message both to Eritreans and to foreign governments that

the movement was capable of exercising sovereign authority responsibly.

The ports of Massawa and Assab were especially crucial. Control over Red Sea access provided the EPLF with economic leverage and strategic legitimacy. Maritime operations resumed under EPLF supervision, and trade channels began reopening despite the absence of formal recognition.

Civil servants who had worked under Ethiopian administration were often retained rather than purged wholesale. Teachers, engineers, doctors, and technicians were encouraged to continue working. This pragmatic approach prevented institutional collapse.

At the same time, the movement rapidly replaced Ethiopian symbols with Eritrean nationalist imagery. Flags changed. Official documents changed. Public language shifted from occupation to liberation. The psychological transition was almost as important as the administrative one.

By the summer of 1991, Eritrea functioned in practice as a separate country even though international law had not yet caught up.

Much of this transition reflected the political instincts of Isaias Afwerki himself. He understood that military triumph could still be reversed diplomatically if Eritrea appeared unstable or extremist.

The Cold War had just ended. Revolutionary movements around the world were suddenly losing ideological sponsors. Western governments were suspicious of armed liberation fronts, especially those with Marxist influences. The EPLF therefore repositioned itself carefully.

Rather than declaring immediate unilateral independence, the leadership agreed to a referendum process. This was a calculated move designed to secure international legitimacy while maintaining full control on the ground.

In reality, the referendum scheduled for 1993 was less a mechanism for determining Eritrea's future than a formal recognition of an already established reality. By then, Ethiopian authority in Eritrea had vanished entirely, and the EPLF governed every aspect of national life.

Isaias also cultivated relations with the new Ethiopian leadership under Meles Zenawi. The alliance between the EPLF and the Tigray People's Liberation

Front had helped destroy the Mengistu regime. For a brief moment, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia appeared remarkably cooperative.

That temporary partnership gave the EPLF precious time to consolidate its rule without facing immediate military confrontation from Addis Ababa.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the transition was the speed of institutional consolidation.

The EPLF transformed military departments into ministries. Wartime logistical networks became civilian supply systems. Revolutionary committees evolved into local government structures.

Health services expanded rapidly after the war. Schools reopened despite severe shortages. Police and security organs emerged directly from EPLF command structures. Currency arrangements, customs systems, and border administration were improvised with surprising effectiveness.

Diaspora Eritreans also played a major role. Communities abroad sent money, expertise, and political support. The diaspora had been essential during the war and now became critical for reconstruction and international lobbying.

Meanwhile, the EPLF tightly controlled political space. Opposition movements were marginalised early. Independent political pluralism never truly developed during the transition period. The leadership argued that unity was necessary to protect fragile independence, but the effect was to entrench one-party dominance before formal statehood even existed.

This remains one of the great paradoxes of Eritrean independence: the same discipline that enabled rapid state formation also laid the groundwork for future political repression.

When the referendum finally took place in 1993, the result was overwhelming support for independence. International observers endorsed the process, and Eritrea formally entered the global community as a sovereign state.

But by then, recognition merely confirmed what had already existed for nearly two years.

The EPLF had succeeded because it understood a brutal truth about politics: sovereignty is often established first by control and only later by law. Governments become real when they administer territory, monopolise force, collect revenues, and command

loyalty. Legal recognition frequently follows facts on the ground rather than creating them.

In Eritrea's case, the transition from insurgency to governance was so swift that the distinction between liberation movement and state almost disappeared overnight.

The immediate post-1991 period still shapes Eritrea today. Supporters of the EPLF, later reorganised as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, view the transition as proof of extraordinary national discipline and resilience. Few liberation movements in modern history managed such an orderly assumption of power after a devastating war.

Critics see the same period differently. They argue that the concentration of authority in the hands of the EPLF leadership prevented democratic institutions from emerging at the moment when they were most needed. Wartime structures became permanent governing mechanisms. Emergency politics never fully ended.

Both interpretations contain truth. The movement's effectiveness in 1991 was undeniable. Eritrea avoided the total institutional collapse that plagued many post-conflict states. Yet the methods that en-

abled rapid stabilisation also centralised power to an exceptional degree.

In hindsight, Eritrea's de facto independence began not with the 1993 referendum but with the moment EPLF fighters entered Asmara and immediately behaved not like rebels, but like rulers.



99.9% for sovereignty

In April 1993, one of the most extraordinary referendum results in modern history emerged from the Horn of Africa. In the territory of Eritrea, following a United Nations-observed vote on independence from Ethiopia, the numbers were staggering: 99.8 per cent voted in favour of sovereignty. To many observers abroad, such a result sounded implausible, the kind of figure more commonly associated with authoritarian plebiscites than democratic exercises. Yet the Eritrean referendum occupied a far more complicated historical space.

Was the vote a genuine expression of self-determination? Or had the outcome already been decided years earlier on the battlefield?

The answer lies somewhere between the moral legitimacy of a liberation struggle and the political inevitability created by military victory. The referendum itself was peaceful, internationally recognised, and broadly accepted as credible. However, by the time ballots were cast, Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia had effectively already occurred. The vote did not create independence so much as formalise a reality forged through thirty years of war.

To understand why 99.8 per cent of Eritreans voted for sovereignty, one must first understand the brutal history that preceded the referendum, a history shaped by colonialism, Cold War rivalries, famine, revolution, and one of Africa's longest liberation struggles.

Modern Eritrea emerged during the late nineteenth century under Italian colonial rule. In 1890, Italy formally established the colony of Eritrea along the Red Sea coast. Though colonial borders in Africa were often arbitrary, Italian administration inadvertently helped create a distinct territorial and political identity separate from neighbouring Ethiopia.

Under Italian rule, Eritrea developed differently from much of the surrounding region. Urban in-

infrastructure expanded in cities such as Asmara, industries were introduced, and colonial institutions fostered a separate administrative culture. Although colonialism brought exploitation and racial hierarchy, it also reinforced the idea that Eritrea existed as a political entity in its own right.

After the defeat of Fascist Italy during the Second World War, Eritrea's future became uncertain. Britain administered the territory temporarily, while international debate intensified over whether Eritrea should become independent, partitioned, or absorbed into Ethiopia.

In 1952, after prolonged diplomatic wrangling, the United Nations federated Eritrea with Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie. Eritrea retained its own parliament and a degree of autonomy. Yet this arrangement quickly deteriorated. Ethiopian authorities steadily dismantled Eritrean self-government, imposed Amharic language policies, and centralised control.

In 1962, Haile Selassie formally annexed Eritrea as a province of Ethiopia. For many Eritreans, this marked the death of federal promises and the beginning of occupation.

The Eritrean War of Independence began before formal annexation and would continue for three decades. Few liberation movements endured such prolonged conflict with such consistency of purpose.

Initially led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and later dominated by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the insurgency evolved into one of the most disciplined and effective guerrilla movements in the world.

The conflict survived multiple Ethiopian regimes. It outlasted emperors, military juntas, ideological transformations, and Cold War shifts. During the 1970s, Ethiopia itself descended into revolution. The Marxist Derg regime, led eventually by Mengistu Haile Mariam, seized power and launched a campaign of extraordinary violence.

The war became increasingly catastrophic. The Soviet Union heavily armed Ethiopia during the Cold War, transforming the conflict into a geopolitical battleground. Eritrean fighters faced Soviet tanks, aircraft, and military advisers. Entire villages were destroyed. Massacres occurred repeatedly. Napalm and aerial bombardment devastated civilian populations.

Yet the EPLF gradually expanded territorial control. What made the Eritrean movement unusual was not simply military resilience but organisational cohesion. The EPLF cultivated a strong nationalist ideology transcending ethnic and religious divisions. Christians and Muslims fought within the same structures. Women participated prominently in combat and administration. The movement built schools, medical facilities, and local governance systems in liberated areas.

By the late 1980s, Ethiopia's position was collapsing. Economic exhaustion, famine, internal rebellions, and the weakening of Soviet support fatally undermined the Derg regime.

In 1991, the EPLF captured Asmara. Almost simultaneously, Ethiopian rebel forces entered Addis Ababa and overthrew Mengistu. At that moment, Eritrea was already independent in practice.

The 1993 referendum did not emerge from negotiations between equal sides debating a constitutional future. It followed outright military victory.

This distinction matters enormously. Unlike referendums in Quebec, Scotland, or Catalonia, the Eritrean vote did not ask citizens to choose between

competing political futures within a functioning state framework. Ethiopia had already lost the war. Eritrean institutions already governed the territory. Ethiopian authority had vanished.

The referendum instead served three key purposes. First, it provided international legitimacy. Newly independent states benefit enormously from legal recognition, particularly in regions vulnerable to border disputes. A UN-observed vote offered diplomatic credibility that military conquest alone could not provide.

Second, it allowed the new Ethiopian leadership under Meles Zenawi to accept Eritrean independence without appearing simply to surrender territory. International endorsement softened the political optics.

Third, it transformed a revolutionary victory into a formal act of popular sovereignty. The United Nations Observer Mission to Verify the Referendum in Eritrea monitored the process and broadly endorsed its legitimacy. Voter turnout exceeded expectations. Eritreans abroad participated enthusiastically. Polling stations reportedly operated peacefully.

There is little serious evidence that the final tally reflected mass fraud. Yet this does not necessarily mean the referendum represented a fully open political environment.

This is the uncomfortable question often overlooked in celebratory narratives of liberation.

By 1993, the EPLF was not merely a victorious liberation movement; it was the uncontested authority across Eritrea. Alternative political structures were weak or absent. After decades of war, pro-Ethiopian sentiment had largely collapsed inside the territory.

The social atmosphere surrounding the referendum was profoundly shaped by sacrifice and collective trauma. Hundreds of thousands had died during the conflict. Entire generations had grown up amid war. Independence was not an abstract constitutional preference; it was the central national cause around which Eritrean identity had been constructed for thirty years.

In such circumstances, voting against sovereignty would have appeared, to many Eritreans, not merely politically unpopular but morally incomprehensible.

This does not invalidate the result. It contextualises it. Critics sometimes point to the 99.8 per cent figure as inherently suspicious. However, referendum results in post-conflict or decolonisation settings often produce overwhelming majorities when one side has already effectively won politically, militarily, and emotionally.

One can compare it, cautiously, to post-Soviet independence votes in the Baltic states or anti-colonial plebiscites elsewhere. When populations experience prolonged conflict tied directly to national identity, the space for meaningful opposition narrows dramatically.

The absence of substantial dissent does not automatically prove coercion. Equally, overwhelming consensus should not be romanticised as pure democratic pluralism.

Western governments and international institutions enthusiastically embraced Eritrea's referendum. This reflected both genuine sympathy for Eritrea's suffering and geopolitical convenience.

By the early 1990s, the Cold War had ended. The collapse of Soviet-backed regimes allowed Western powers to reframe many African conflicts through

the language of democracy and self-determination. Eritrea fit neatly into this narrative: a disciplined liberation movement defeating a brutal Marxist dictatorship.

Yet international attitudes toward self-determination have always been selective. Movements supported by Western interests often receive praise for democratic aspirations, while others are labelled destabilising separatists. Eritrea benefited from timing as much as moral legitimacy. The referendum occurred during a rare period when major powers preferred regional stabilisation over preserving old territorial arrangements.

The Organisation of African Unity, traditionally hostile to border changes because of fears surrounding separatism, also accepted Eritrea's independence. This was significant. African leaders generally viewed colonial borders as untouchable to avoid endless fragmentation. Eritrea's colonial history provided a legal and historical argument that distinguished it from many secessionist movements. In effect, Eritrea was not portrayed as creating new borders but restoring old ones.

History, however, rarely ends with triumphant referendums. The optimism surrounding Eritrea's inde-

pendence quickly faded. The EPLF transformed into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which consolidated one-party rule. Elections never materialised. Independent media disappeared. Political dissent became dangerous.

Perhaps most tragically, Eritrea and Ethiopia returned to war between 1998 and 2000 over border disputes, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths.

The liberation movement that once symbolised anti-authoritarian resistance gradually became associated with indefinite military conscription, repression, and isolation.

This does not erase the legitimacy of Eritrean independence. But it complicates simplistic narratives about liberation struggles naturally producing democratic societies.

The 1993 referendum solved the question of sovereignty. It did not solve the question of governance.

The Eritrean people overwhelmingly desired independence. After decades of war, annexation, and sacrifice, there is little doubt that sovereignty reflected authentic popular sentiment. The referendum was not merely a fabricated spectacle imposed upon an unwilling population.

At the same time, the vote occurred in conditions where the political outcome had already been determined by history, military success, and national mobilisation. There was no realistic pathway back to Ethiopian rule. The referendum formalised an existing reality rather than creating a new one through open-ended democratic contestation.

In that sense, it was both genuine and inevitable. The 99.8 per cent result should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of perfect democratic unanimity, nor dismissed as meaningless propaganda. It reflected the culmination of a liberation struggle that had already reshaped political reality long before ballots appeared.

The referendum was less a debate about the future than a collective confirmation of a past already written in blood, endurance and victory. And perhaps that is why the result was so overwhelming.

By 1993, Eritreans were not deciding whether they wished to become independent. They were declaring that, after thirty years of war, they already were.



From liberation front to ruling party

Few post-colonial states embody the paradox of liberation as starkly as Isaias Afwerki's Eritrea. Born from one of Africa's longest and most disciplined armed struggles, the country emerged into independence in 1993 with immense moral prestige, extraordinary public unity, and a leadership revered for defeating overwhelming odds. Yet the same structures that enabled victory in war would later inhibit democratic transition in peace.

The central tragedy of modern Eritrea is not simply authoritarianism. Many newly independent states drifted towards centralised rule. Eritrea's deeper problem lies in the incomplete transformation of a liberation movement into a civilian state. The

Eritrean People's Liberation Front won the war but never truly ceased being a guerrilla army. Instead, it became the architecture of governance itself. The result has been a political system where militarised discipline replaced pluralism, dissent became synonymous with betrayal, and national survival eclipsed constitutional development.

At the centre of this continuity stands Afwerki, who has governed Eritrea since independence without elections, without a functioning constitution, and without meaningful political opposition. His endurance is not merely the story of one man's authoritarian instincts. It is the culmination of organisational habits forged during three decades of insurgency.

To understand contemporary Eritrea, one must first understand the exceptional nature of its liberation war.

After Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia and the subsequent annexation of Eritrea by "[Ethiopia", "Ethiopia"] under Emperor Haile Selassie, armed resistance emerged in the early 1960s. The first major movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front, was eventually challenged by younger, more ideologically rigid factions that would coalesce into the EPLF.

By the 1970s, the EPLF had become more than a rebel force. It operated as a proto-state. In liberated areas it administered education, healthcare, agricultural systems, judicial mechanisms, and political training. Fighters were not merely soldiers; they were ideological cadres. Self-reliance, sacrifice, secrecy and absolute organisational discipline became sacred virtues.

This discipline was not cosmetic. It was essential for survival. The EPLF fought not only against Ethiopian governments but eventually against the Soviet-backed military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, one of the most heavily armed states in Africa at the time. Internal fragmentation could have destroyed the movement. Consequently, centralisation became institutional doctrine.

Afwerki emerged within this environment as a strategist and organiser of remarkable political skill. Unlike many revolutionary leaders who inherited fragmented coalitions, he helped shape the EPLF into an unusually cohesive military-political machine. By the late stages of the war, dissent within the movement had largely been subordinated to command unity. This success, however, carried consequences that would become apparent only after victory.

When Eritrea formally achieved independence following the 1993 Eritrean independence referendum, there was widespread optimism. International observers saw the new state as disciplined, corruption-resistant, and development-oriented. Compared with many post-liberation governments, the EPLF leadership appeared pragmatic rather than overtly ideological.

Yet independence did not produce institutional separation between party, military, and state. Instead, the EPLF simply evolved into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice in 1994, retaining its hierarchical command culture.

The renaming suggested political evolution, but the underlying organisational DNA remained largely intact. The movement had won legitimacy through armed struggle, not electoral competition. Authority derived from sacrifice and military achievement rather than democratic consent. This distinction proved decisive.

Liberation movements often struggle to transition into pluralist parties because guerrilla warfare rewards precisely the traits democracy seeks to restrain: secrecy, ideological conformity, rigid hierarchy, and suspicion of internal opposition. In wartime, dissent

can kill a movement. In peacetime, suppressing dissent can suffocate a nation.

Eritrea never fully crossed this divide. The proposed constitution ratified in 1997 was never implemented. National elections promised in the 1990s never occurred. Independent civil society failed to emerge. Newspapers were shut down. Political critics disappeared into prisons. The ruling front continued to govern less like a civilian administration than a permanent revolutionary command structure.

Supporters of the government frequently argue that Eritrea's geopolitical circumstances justified this trajectory. The country faced regional hostility, economic isolation, and eventually devastating conflict with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000 during the Eritrean–Ethiopian War. These pressures undeniably reinforced securitisation.

But external threats alone cannot explain the depth of political closure. Rather, the war with Ethiopia intensified pre-existing institutional tendencies rooted in the liberation era itself.

One of the most enduring legacies of guerrilla movements is the belief that the struggle never truly ends.

In Eritrea, this mentality became central to governance. The state cultivated a doctrine of permanent vigilance: enemies abroad, traitors within, conspiracies everywhere. Under such conditions, democratic openness could always be postponed in the name of national defence.

National service exemplifies this phenomenon. Initially framed as a patriotic obligation for reconstruction and defence, it evolved into an indefinite system affecting much of Eritrean society. The line between citizen and soldier blurred. The militarisation that had once liberated the country became embedded in everyday governance.

This was not accidental. Guerrilla movements derive cohesion from collective sacrifice. Demobilisation risks weakening the moral authority of the revolutionary elite. A population permanently mobilised remains psychologically connected to the liberation ethos and therefore to the leadership that claims guardianship over it.

Afwerki mastered this narrative. He consistently presented himself not as an ordinary politician subject to replacement but as the custodian of Eritrea's hard-won sovereignty. In this framework, opposition

is not merely disagreement; it becomes existential threat.

Such rhetoric resonates because Eritrea's historical traumas are real. Colonial domination under Italy, federation disputes, annexation, prolonged war, and international marginalisation created profound national insecurity. The ruling party has repeatedly invoked these experiences to justify exceptional political control.

Yet a state permanently organised around wartime psychology struggles to normalise civilian politics.

Afwerki's longevity cannot be understood solely through coercion. It also rests upon the symbolic capital accumulated during the liberation struggle.

Many liberation leaders in Africa enjoyed immense prestige after independence, but few maintained such uninterrupted dominance for so long. In Eritrea, the absence of institutional succession mechanisms allowed revolutionary legitimacy to become increasingly personalised around Afwerki himself.

This personalisation was facilitated by the EPLF's internal culture. Guerrilla organisations often elevate leaders who embody strategic discipline and ideolog-

ical steadfastness. Over time, criticism of leadership can become conflated with disloyalty to the cause.

The result in Eritrea has been a political system with remarkably weak institutional counterweights. Parliament became marginal. The judiciary lacked independence. The constitution remained dormant. The ruling party overshadowed all state functions.

The most significant challenge to Afwerki from within the ruling elite came in 2001, when senior officials known as the G-15 called for democratic reforms and implementation of the constitution. The government responded with arrests, detentions, and suppression of independent media.

That episode revealed how incomplete Eritrea's post-war transition truly was. Rather than evolving into a system capable of managing elite disagreement through institutions, the state reverted to revolutionary methods of control. In effect, the liberation front remained psychologically in the trenches.

Eritrea is not unique in facing these dilemmas. Across Africa, several liberation movements transformed into dominant ruling parties after independence or revolutionary victory.

The African National Congress in South Africa, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe, and National Resistance Movement in Uganda all carried elements of liberation-era legitimacy into state power.

However, Eritrea represents a particularly extreme case because state institutions never meaningfully differentiated themselves from the liberation structure. In some countries, ruling parties gradually accommodated elections, opposition, courts, and civil society, however imperfectly. Eritrea instead institutionalised revolutionary exceptionalism.

Part of this stems from the EPLF's extraordinary wartime cohesion. Unlike movements fractured by ethnic or ideological divisions, the EPLF viewed unity as sacred. That unity proved militarily effective but politically constraining. Multiparty competition appeared not as healthy disagreement but as fragmentation threatening national survival.

This helps explain why Eritrea's leadership has often portrayed liberal democracy as alien, destabilising, or externally imposed. From the government's perspective, the disciplined revolutionary state delivered independence, whereas pluralist politics else-

where in the region frequently produced corruption, ethnic conflict, or state collapse.

There is some truth in this critique. Western analyses sometimes underestimate the chaos that engulfed many post-colonial states. But acknowledging the failures of other systems does not absolve Eritrea's own authoritarian stagnation.

The consequences of Eritrea's incomplete transition have been profound. Large numbers of Eritreans have fled the country over the past two decades, many escaping indefinite national service, political repression, or economic limitations. The paradox is painful: a nation born through collective sacrifice now witnesses generations departing in search of ordinary civilian lives.

Meanwhile, political paralysis has hindered institutional development. Because power remains heavily concentrated, governance depends excessively upon the leadership's calculations rather than durable legal frameworks.

This creates long-term vulnerability. Liberation legitimacy cannot sustain a political order indefinitely, especially as younger generations grow increasingly distant from the memory of war. States ultimately

require institutions stronger than revolutionary nostalgia.

Afwerki's persistent leadership has therefore become both symbol and symptom. He symbolises continuity with the liberation struggle, but his prolonged rule also reflects the absence of mechanisms capable of producing legitimate succession. That absence may prove Eritrea's greatest unresolved challenge.

Eritrea's story is often narrated as one of liberation betrayed. But the reality is more complicated. The same organisational culture that secured independence also constrained democracy. The EPLF's military discipline, ideological cohesion, and suspicion of division were rational responses to decades of brutal conflict. Without them, Eritrea might never have become independent at all.

Yet virtues in war can become liabilities in peace. The tragedy of post-independence Eritrea lies in the failure to transform revolutionary authority into constitutional authority. The liberation front conquered territory, but it never fully relinquished the political logic of insurgency. As a result, the state remained trapped between wartime mobilisation and peacetime governance.

Afwerki's enduring rule is therefore not an historical accident. It is the political expression of a liberation movement that never entirely ceased being a liberation movement.

More than three decades after independence, Eritrea still faces the unfinished task that confronts many revolutionary states, learning how to replace the legitimacy of the gun with the legitimacy of institutions.



A new border, an old wound

In May 1993, the red, green and blue flag of a newly independent Eritrea rose over Asmara while jubilant crowds danced in the streets. Across the border, however, the mood in Ethiopia was far more conflicted. Officially, Addis Ababa accepted the result of Eritrea's referendum on independence. Privately, many Ethiopians understood that their country had just undergone one of the greatest geopolitical amputations in modern African history.

For the first time in centuries, Ethiopia had become landlocked. The separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia did not merely redraw a frontier. It transformed the strategic balance of the Horn of Africa, reshaped trade and military policy, and planted the seeds of bitterness that would explode into the catastrophic

Eritrean–Ethiopian War of 1998–2000. The independence of Eritrea was celebrated internationally as a triumph of self-determination after decades of war. Yet for Ethiopia, it represented the loss of access to the Red Sea, a blow to national pride, and the emergence of a rival state occupying what many Ethiopians regarded as historically intertwined territory. The tragedy is that both narratives contain truth.

To understand the emotional and political consequences of Eritrean independence, one must first appreciate how deeply entangled Eritrea and Ethiopia had become by the twentieth century.

Eritrea, colonised by Italy in the late nineteenth century, developed separately from the Ethiopian Empire for decades. Italian rule left behind infrastructure, ports and administrative systems distinct from those south of the Mereb River. Following Italy's defeat in the Second World War, the future of Eritrea became an international question. In 1952, the United Nations federated Eritrea with Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie.

The federation did not last long. By 1962, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea, dissolving its autonomy and igniting armed resistance. What followed was

one of Africa's longest liberation struggles. Eritrean insurgent groups, most notably the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), fought successive Ethiopian governments for thirty years. The war survived monarchy, revolution, Cold War alignments and famine.

When the Marxist Derg regime collapsed in 1991, Eritrean forces entered Asmara while Ethiopian rebels led by Meles Zenawi took Addis Ababa. The military alliance between the EPLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) appeared, briefly, to herald a new era of cooperation.

In 1993, Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence in a UN-observed referendum. Ethiopia recognised the result. On paper, the divorce appeared remarkably civil. In reality, unresolved questions lingered beneath the celebrations.

Modern discussions of Eritrean independence often focus on Eritrea's sacrifice and aspirations. Less attention is paid to the psychological and strategic shock suffered by Ethiopia.

Geography matters. Ports matter even more. Before 1993, Ethiopia possessed access to the Red Sea through the ports of Assab and Massawa. After Eritrea's independence, those ports belonged to a for-

eign state. Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation, suddenly depended on another country for maritime access.

No major state willingly accepts such vulnerability without anxiety. For centuries, Ethiopian rulers had viewed access to the sea as essential to sovereignty and survival. The loss was not merely economic. It carried symbolic humiliation. Many Ethiopians felt their nation had been reduced in stature overnight, transformed from a regional empire into a land-locked power dependent on neighbours.

This sense of strategic insecurity would shape Ethiopian policy for decades. Even today, Ethiopian political discourse remains haunted by the "sea question". Successive governments have sought influence over ports in Djibouti, Somaliland, Sudan and elsewhere precisely because the Eritrean separation created a permanent structural weakness.

The irony is striking. Eritrea gained independence partly because many Eritreans feared domination by Ethiopia. Yet Ethiopia's resulting insecurity increased the likelihood of future confrontation.

Initially, relations between the two states appeared promising. Borders remained open. Trade flourished.

Ethiopians continued using Eritrean ports. Families divided by war reunited. Leaders in Addis Ababa and Asmara spoke of partnership rather than rivalry.

But the friendship rested on dangerously vague foundations. The border itself had never been fully demarcated. Colonial-era treaties were ambiguous. Local administrators often operated according to custom rather than clearly surveyed lines. Villages such as Badme existed in a grey zone of competing claims.

Economic tensions also emerged rapidly. Eritrea introduced its own currency, the nakfa, in 1997. Disputes followed over trade rules, tariffs and exchange mechanisms. Ethiopia increasingly suspected Eritrea of exploiting economic ties while pursuing an independent regional agenda. Eritrea, meanwhile, accused Ethiopia of arrogance and interference.

Personal rivalries deepened the divide. Relations between Isaias Afwerki and Meles Zenawi deteriorated from revolutionary camaraderie into mutual suspicion.

What had once been a liberation alliance became a competition between two proud governments convinced of their own historical legitimacy.

In 1998, tensions exploded into war around the disputed town of Badme. At first glance, the conflict appeared absurd. Thousands would die over barren frontier territory with little obvious economic value. International observers struggled to understand why two impoverished nations would devote enormous resources to trench warfare reminiscent of the First World War.

But Badme was never just about Badme. For Eritrea, the border represented the sanctity of independence. Any Ethiopian encroachment could be interpreted as an attempt to reverse liberation itself. Eritrea's leadership feared that compromise would undermine the very meaning of sovereignty after decades of sacrifice.

For Ethiopia, the conflict touched the unresolved wound left by separation. The loss of the coastline had already generated profound national resentment. Many Ethiopians regarded Eritrea as benefiting unfairly from Ethiopian markets and infrastructure while simultaneously asserting territorial claims. The border dispute became a vehicle for wider frustrations.

Nationalism surged on both sides. The resulting war between 1998 and 2000 was devastating. Tens

of thousands died. Entire communities were displaced. Economies already weakened by poverty and drought suffered immense damage. Both governments engaged in mass expulsions of civilians based on ethnicity or nationality, poisoning social relations for generations.

The conflict demonstrated how quickly unresolved historical grievances can transform into open warfare when combined with nationalism, insecurity and wounded pride.

One uncomfortable truth underlies the entire story: Ethiopia never psychologically adjusted to being landlocked.

This is not to argue that Ethiopia sought outright reconquest immediately after Eritrean independence. The situation was more subtle and more dangerous. Many Ethiopian elites accepted Eritrea's sovereignty legally while struggling to accept its geopolitical consequences emotionally.

The loss of Assab, in particular, became emblematic of decline. Historically, Ethiopian imperial expansion under emperors such as Menelik II had incorporated diverse territories into a multi-ethnic em-

pire. Eritrean independence disrupted that imperial inheritance. For some Ethiopians, it represented not liberation but fragmentation.

Eritreans, naturally, viewed matters differently. From their perspective, independence ended decades of domination and warfare. They interpreted Ethiopian nostalgia for Red Sea access as veiled revisionism.

Thus, even ordinary policy disputes acquired existential significance. A customs disagreement became a sovereignty issue. A border patrol incident became evidence of expansionism. Economic competition became national betrayal.

The 1998–2000 war was therefore not an accident arising from poor diplomacy alone. It was the violent expression of unresolved historical contradictions.

Western governments and international organisations frequently misunderstood the depth of these tensions.

In the early 1990s, Eritrea and Ethiopia were often presented as examples of successful post-Cold War African reconstruction. Their leaders were praised as pragmatic revolutionaries. Donors focused heav-

ily on economic reform and humanitarian recovery while underestimating the political dangers embedded within the separation process.

The assumption was that rational economic interests would override historical grievances. Instead, history returned with brutal force.

The international community also tended to frame Eritrea solely as a victim of Ethiopian oppression, overlooking how independence altered the regional balance. Ethiopia's strategic anxieties were real, even if they did not justify war. Ignoring those anxieties made sustainable peace harder to achieve. A settlement that humiliates one side often creates the conditions for future conflict.

Although the Algiers Agreement formally ended the conflict in 2000, peace remained cold and fragile for nearly two decades.

Borders hardened. Trade collapsed. Military mobilisation became permanent. Eritrea evolved into one of the world's most militarised and isolated states, with indefinite national service justified partly by fear of Ethiopian aggression. Ethiopia, meanwhile, continued searching for secure alternatives to Eritrean ports, becoming heavily dependent on Djibouti.

The human cost was enormous. An entire generation in both countries grew up shaped by hostility, propaganda and militarisation. Families remained separated. Economic opportunities vanished. The Horn of Africa became less stable precisely when co-operation might have transformed the region.

The rapprochement announced in 2018 between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki briefly raised hopes of lasting reconciliation. Borders reopened temporarily. Flights resumed. Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet even this peace proved fragile. The subsequent conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region revealed how unresolved regional rivalries and authoritarian politics still haunt the Horn. Eritrean troops re-entered Ethiopian territory not as enemies this time, but as allies against the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The shifting alliances underscored how deeply interconnected the destinies of Eritrea and Ethiopia remain despite formal independence.

Eritrea's independence was both justified and destabilising. That dual reality is difficult for partisans on either side to admit. Eritreans understandably celebrate liberation from decades of conflict and central control. Ethiopians understandably mourn the

geopolitical consequences of losing direct access to the sea.

Neither sentiment disappears simply because outsiders prefer neat moral narratives. The deeper tragedy is that geography condemned both nations to interdependence even after separation. Eritrea's ports remain economically valuable to Ethiopia. Ethiopia's market remains economically valuable to Eritrea. Cooperation could have transformed the Horn of Africa into a major regional trade corridor linking the interior to the Red Sea.

Instead, distrust prevailed. The lesson of Eritrea and Ethiopia is not that independence movements are inherently dangerous, nor that historical unions must be preserved at all costs. Rather, it is that political divorces between deeply interconnected societies require more than legal recognition and celebratory rhetoric. They demand careful management of borders, economies, identities and collective memory.

Otherwise, an old wound merely receives a new border. And in the Horn of Africa, that wound has never fully healed.



Red Sea ripple effects

In May 1991, as the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam collapsed in Ethiopia, jubilant crowds filled the streets of Asmara. After three decades of war, Eritrean fighters had achieved what many across Africa once considered impossible: the defeat of one of the continent's most heavily armed regimes and the creation of an independent state through armed struggle. Two years later, Eritreans overwhelmingly voted for independence in a UN-supervised referendum, and the new nation emerged with enormous goodwill from neighbours, Western governments, and liberation movements alike.

Yet Eritrea's victory did more than redraw borders. It fundamentally reshaped the political and military

balance of the Horn of Africa. The consequences rippled far beyond Asmara and Addis Ababa, affecting Sudan's internal wars, Somalia's fragmentation, Djibouti's strategic anxieties, and the wider geopolitics of the Red Sea. Eritrea's trajectory, from revolutionary darling to isolated regional actor and later strategic partner once more, reveals how liberation movements often struggle to transform military success into sustainable diplomacy.

The Horn of Africa has long been a region where ideology, identity, and geography collide violently. Eritrea's independence did not calm those tensions. In many ways, it redistributed them.

To understand Eritrea's impact, one must first appreciate the nature of its liberation struggle. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), led by Isaias Afwerki, was not merely a nationalist insurgency. It developed into one of Africa's most disciplined and ideologically driven guerrilla movements. Operating from mountainous strongholds and surviving repeated Ethiopian offensives backed first by the United States and later by the Soviet Union, the EPLF forged a political culture centred on self-reliance, militarisation, and suspicion of foreign dependency.

Crucially, Eritrea's war was deeply intertwined with Ethiopia's own internal rebellion. The EPLF cooperated closely with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which fought the Derg regime in northern Ethiopia. This alliance was not simply tactical; it was transformative. Eritrean fighters trained Tigrayan rebels, shared intelligence, and coordinated offensives that eventually destroyed Mengistu's state.

At the moment of victory, many observers imagined a new regional order emerging from this revolutionary partnership. Eritrea gained independence. The TPLF became the dominant force within Ethiopia's new ruling coalition. For a brief period, relations between Asmara and Addis Ababa appeared remarkably close.

But the alliance contained the seeds of future conflict. The EPLF and TPLF shared an enemy, not a common long-term vision. Eritrea viewed itself as an equal sovereign state shaped by sacrifice and wartime discipline. Ethiopia's new leadership, meanwhile, governed a vast multinational federation wrestling with ethnic tensions, economic fragility, and historical resentment over the loss of Eritrea's Red Sea coastline.

The partnership gradually deteriorated over trade disputes, currency disagreements, border demarcations, and competing ambitions for regional influence. By 1998, the two former allies were at war. That war would alter the entire Horn.

The border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 was catastrophic. Tens of thousands died in trench warfare reminiscent of the First World War. Families were split across borders. Economies collapsed under military expenditure. Hopes of regional integration vanished almost overnight.

More importantly, the war polarised neighbouring states into rival camps. Sudan, which had tense relations with Ethiopia during parts of the Cold War and Islamist links under Hassan al-Turabi and Omar al-Bashir, saw opportunities in the shifting balance. Eritrea had earlier supported Sudanese opposition groups, accusing Khartoum of backing Islamist militants hostile to Asmara. Sudan, in turn, allegedly supported Eritrean Islamist factions. The borderlands became arenas for proxy warfare.

This pattern would become characteristic of the Horn, states too weak or suspicious to confront one another directly instead armed rebel groups across porous frontiers.

Eritrea became particularly associated with this strategy. As diplomatic isolation increased after the border war, Asmara leaned heavily into asymmetric regional influence. It supported Ethiopian insurgent groups opposed to the TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia retaliated by backing Eritrean opposition factions.

The result was a cycle of mutual destabilisation that prevented meaningful regional cooperation for nearly two decades.

Sudan's relationship with Eritrea illustrates the contradictions at the heart of Eritrean foreign policy. On one hand, Eritrea presented itself as a secular revolutionary state resisting Islamist extremism. This stance attracted support from countries concerned about Sudan's Islamist government during the 1990s. Eritrea hosted Sudanese opposition groups and positioned itself as part of an anti-Islamist regional axis alongside Ethiopia and Uganda.

On the other hand, Eritrea's isolation pushed it into increasingly pragmatic, even contradictory alliances. Over time, Asmara repaired relations with Khartoum despite years of hostility. Strategic necessity overtook ideological consistency.

This adaptability allowed Eritrea to survive, but it also deepened international mistrust. Western governments increasingly viewed Asmara as unpredictable and opaque. By the late 2000s, Eritrea faced accusations of supporting armed groups across the region, including Islamist actors in Somalia.

Whether all those accusations were accurate remains debated. What matters politically is that Eritrea acquired the reputation of a spoiler state.

Sudan, meanwhile, benefited from Eritrea's fluctuating alliances. Khartoum became adept at exploiting divisions among neighbouring states, balancing relations with Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Gulf powers while managing its own internal conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan.

The Horn's politics increasingly resembled a hall of mirrors: every alliance temporary, every rivalry reversible.

No country better demonstrates the destructive ripple effects of regional rivalry than Somalia. Following the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, Somalia descended into fragmentation and civil war. Regional actors quickly recognised that Somalia's

vacuum could either threaten or benefit their security interests.

Ethiopia, fearing Islamist movements and Somali irredentism, repeatedly intervened in Somali affairs. Eritrea, locked in bitter rivalry with Ethiopia after 1998, saw Somalia partly through the lens of its conflict with Addis Ababa.

Thus Somalia became another proxy battleground. Eritrea was accused by the United Nations and several governments of supporting anti-Ethiopian Islamist factions, including elements linked to the Union of Islamic Courts and later Al-Shabaab. Eritrea consistently denied these allegations, arguing that Ethiopia's military intervention in Somalia was itself destabilising and illegitimate.

Regardless of the precise details, the broader pattern is undeniable: the Ethiopia–Eritrea rivalry internationalised Somalia's conflict even further.

Instead of acting collectively to stabilise Somalia, Horn states deepened fragmentation through competing interventions. Ethiopia sought strategic depth. Eritrea sought leverage against Ethiopia. External powers pursued counter-terrorism objectives. Somali civilians paid the price.

The tragedy is that Eritrea itself had once embodied a successful anti-state insurgency built on discipline and nationalist legitimacy. Yet rather than promoting a model of regional reconstruction after independence, the Horn drifted into perpetual militarised competition.

If Somalia symbolised collapse, Djibouti symbolised vulnerability. Tiny, strategically positioned, and heavily dependent on foreign military partnerships, Djibouti watched Eritrea's rise with caution. The two countries fought brief clashes in 2008 around the disputed Ras Doumeira area, further increasing tensions in the Red Sea corridor.

Djibouti's importance grew enormously as Ethiopia lost direct access to Eritrean ports after independence and especially after the 1998 war. Addis Ababa became heavily reliant on Djibouti's ports for trade. This transformed Djibouti into Ethiopia's economic lifeline and a critical geopolitical asset.

For Eritrea, this development was both economically damaging and strategically frustrating. Had relations with Ethiopia remained peaceful, Eritrean ports such as Assab might have become engines of regional integration. Instead, the border war redirected trade and infrastructure toward Djibouti.

This shift had profound implications. Djibouti leveraged its position to attract foreign military bases from France, the United States, China, and others. The Red Sea became increasingly militarised. Gulf powers, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, expanded their involvement in the Horn during the Yemen conflict.

Eritrea, once isolated, eventually found new relevance through Gulf security partnerships, particularly involving the port of Assab. Thus the same geography that had contributed to Eritrea's strategic importance during the liberation struggle once again made it indispensable but now as part of wider Middle Eastern power competition.

Western narratives often portray Eritrea as completely isolated after the 2000s. This interpretation misses important nuances. Eritrea certainly faced sanctions, diplomatic estrangement, and severe criticism over human rights and indefinite national service. Many young Eritreans fled the country, creating one of the world's most significant refugee diasporas relative to population size.

Yet Eritrea was never entirely irrelevant. Asmara maintained strategic relationships with Gulf states, engaged selectively with African partners, and wait-

ed patiently for political changes within Ethiopia. That patience paid off dramatically in 2018 when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced a peace initiative and accepted the border ruling that previous Ethiopian governments had resisted implementing.

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea transformed regional politics almost overnight. Roads reopened. Flights resumed. Diplomatic celebrations followed. Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize. Eritrea appeared to be emerging from decades of regional isolation.

But optimism again proved fragile. The outbreak of the Tigray War in 2020 revealed how unresolved the region's historical tensions remained. Eritrean forces intervened decisively alongside the Ethiopian federal government against the TPLF, their old wartime ally turned bitter enemy. History in the Horn rarely disappears. It mutates.

Today, Eritrea occupies a paradoxical position. It is simultaneously one of the Horn's most resilient states and one of its most closed political systems. Its leadership survived international pressure, sanctions, economic hardship, and regional upheaval. Yet sur-

vival has often come at the expense of institutional development and political openness.

Still, Eritrea's influence on regional geopolitics remains undeniable. Its independence permanently altered Ethiopia's strategic orientation. Its rivalry with the TPLF shaped decades of proxy warfare. Its coastline increased the geopolitical significance of the Red Sea corridor. Its alliances affected conflicts from Sudan to Somalia.

The wider lesson is sobering. Liberation victories do not automatically produce regional stability. In the Horn of Africa, military triumph often entrenched securitised politics rather than dismantling them. Eritrea's leaders emerged from war convinced that vigilance and self-reliance were essential to survival. Neighbouring governments drew similar conclusions. Trust became nearly impossible.

As global powers now compete for influence along the Red Sea, from Washington and Beijing to Abu Dhabi and Ankara, the Horn once again sits at the centre of strategic rivalry. Ports, shipping lanes, military bases, and energy routes have made the region globally significant in ways reminiscent of the Cold War.

Eritrea's story therefore matters far beyond its borders. Its victory over the Derg reshaped alliances, altered trade networks, intensified proxy conflicts, and contributed to the militarisation of the Red Sea arena. What began as a liberation struggle evolved into a regional realignment whose consequences still define the politics of the Horn today.

And perhaps that is the enduring irony of Eritrea's revolution, a movement born in pursuit of sovereignty helped create a regional order where no state truly feels secure.



The heroic narrative vs. the authoritarian reality

Few liberation movements in modern African history command the same mixture of admiration, reverence, disappointment and controversy as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. To many Eritreans, the EPLF remains the organisation that achieved what once appeared impossible: defeating one of Africa's largest armies, resisting foreign domination, and securing Eritrea's independence after decades of war. Its fighters became symbols of sacrifice, discipline and national determination.

Yet the movement's legacy cannot be separated from what followed victory. The same organisation that promised liberation evolved into the ruling structure of one of the world's most closed and heavily controlled states. Critics argue that the ideals of

independence hardened into authoritarian governance, indefinite military conscription and systematic repression. Admirers see a nation forced into militarisation by hostile regional politics and continual external threats. Detractors see a liberation movement that never learned how to relinquish war-time control.

The story of the EPLF is therefore neither a simple triumph nor a straightforward betrayal. It is a deeply complicated historical transformation, one that forces uncomfortable questions about revolution, nationalism and power itself.

Understanding the EPLF requires understanding Eritrea's unusual history. Unlike many African states whose borders were drawn with little regard for identity or administration, Eritrea emerged from a distinct colonial experience. Under Italy, Eritrea developed separately from neighbouring Ethiopia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Italian rule was exploitative and racist, but it also created infrastructure, ports and a separate administrative identity.

Following Italy's defeat in the Second World War, Eritrea came under British administration before be-

ing federated with Ethiopia in 1952 under a United Nations arrangement. That federation quickly unravelled. Emperor Haile Selassie steadily dismantled Eritrean autonomy before formally annexing the territory in 1962.

For many Eritreans, annexation represented not merely political absorption but cultural domination. Armed resistance began soon afterwards. The earliest phase of the struggle was led by the Eritrean Liberation Front, but internal divisions, ideological disputes and regional tensions fractured the movement. From these divisions emerged the EPLF during the 1970s.

The EPLF distinguished itself through rigorous organisation, ideological discipline and a remarkable ability to survive under extreme conditions. Its leadership promoted self-reliance almost as a sacred principle. Fighters built underground hospitals, schools and workshops in remote mountainous areas while enduring relentless warfare.

At the same time, the movement cultivated a powerful mythos around sacrifice. Martyrdom became central to its identity. Tens of thousands of Eritreans died during the independence struggle, and near-

ly every family carried scars from the conflict. The EPLF's legitimacy would later rest heavily upon this shared suffering.

The movement's military achievement remains extraordinary by any historical standard. During the Cold War, Ethiopia, especially after the rise of the Marxist Derg regime, became one of the Soviet Union's most heavily armed allies in Africa. Ethiopian forces possessed tanks, aircraft and extensive foreign military support.

The EPLF, by contrast, relied largely on guerrilla warfare, captured equipment and local support networks.

Its defining victory came at the Battle of Afabet in 1988, where EPLF fighters destroyed major Ethiopian divisions and shifted the strategic balance of the war. The victory demonstrated that the Ethiopian state was no longer capable of crushing the insurgency militarily.

By 1991, Ethiopian President Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country, and EPLF forces entered the Eritrean capital, Asmara. Two years later, Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence in a UN-supervised referendum.

To many observers at the time, Eritrea looked poised to become a rare post-colonial success story. The EPLF leadership projected efficiency, modesty and national unity. Unlike numerous liberation movements elsewhere, it appeared less tribal, less corrupt and more disciplined. Women had served prominently within the armed struggle, creating hope for greater gender equality. Foreign journalists often portrayed Eritrean fighters as austere idealists rather than power-seeking warlords. There was genuine optimism.

After independence, however, the EPLF did not transform itself into a conventional democratic movement. Instead, it evolved into the dominant political structure of the new state.

The organisation renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ, but meaningful political pluralism never emerged. Elections were repeatedly postponed. Independent media disappeared. Opposition groups were suppressed or exiled.

Supporters of the government argue that Eritrea inherited a devastated society after thirty years of war. The country faced immense economic hardship, regional instability and unresolved tensions with

Ethiopia. In their view, strong central authority was necessary for survival. They also note that Eritrea's leadership feared ethnic fragmentation and foreign interference, both of which had destabilised other African states.

There is truth in this argument. Eritrea did confront genuine security concerns, particularly after the devastating Eritrean–Ethiopian War. The war reignited existential fears inside the Eritrean leadership. Tens of thousands died, and the border dispute remained unresolved for years despite international rulings.

The conflict profoundly shaped the state that followed. The government increasingly framed dissent as a national security threat. Wartime mobilisation became permanent political culture. But security concerns alone cannot explain the extent of political repression that emerged.

No issue defines modern Eritrea more than national service. Initially introduced as an eighteen-month programme combining military service and reconstruction work, conscription gradually became indefinite in practice. Large numbers of Eritreans spent years, sometimes decades, in military or state-as-

signed labour roles with limited pay and few avenues for release.

The government defends the policy as essential national defence in a hostile region. Officials frequently point to Ethiopia's former refusal to implement border rulings after the 1998–2000 war. They argue that Eritrea remained under constant threat and therefore required permanent mobilisation.

Yet critics describe the system as a machinery of coercion that has devastated civilian life and driven mass emigration. Human rights organisations have repeatedly documented arbitrary detention, forced labour conditions and severe restrictions on freedom of movement.

The tragedy is especially stark because the liberation struggle once promised dignity and self-determination. Instead, many young Eritreans have fled the country in large numbers, undertaking dangerous journeys across deserts and seas to escape compulsory service and political repression. For a movement built upon the rhetoric of liberation, this reality represents a painful contradiction.

The EPLF's trajectory is not unique. Across the twentieth century, many liberation movements

struggled to transition from revolutionary discipline to democratic governance.

Movements forged in war often develop intense internal hierarchies. Loyalty becomes synonymous with survival. Dissent is viewed not as healthy disagreement but as betrayal. Military structures seep into civilian governance.

This pattern appeared in various forms in states shaped by armed liberation struggles, from parts of southern Africa to post-revolutionary regimes elsewhere in the world. Wartime legitimacy can become a permanent justification for political dominance.

The EPLF's leadership emerged from one of the harshest guerrilla wars in modern history. Its worldview was shaped by siege, sacrifice and survival. That mentality did not disappear after independence. If anything, it became institutionalised.

President Isaias Afwerki embodied this continuity. Admired by supporters for his resilience and refusal to bow to foreign pressure, he has simultaneously become one of Africa's most criticised leaders for authoritarian governance. To supporters, he represents steadfast independence. To opponents, he symbolis-

es the transformation of revolutionary idealism into rigid autocracy.

Outside observers sometimes struggle to understand why sections of the Eritrean population continue to defend the government despite international criticism. The answer lies partly in historical memory.

For many older Eritreans, the liberation struggle was not abstract politics but lived trauma. Entire communities were bombed, displaced and destroyed during the war with Ethiopia. The EPLF is remembered as the force that protected Eritrean identity when few others would.

There is also resentment toward what some Eritreans perceive as selective Western criticism. International powers often ignored Eritrean suffering during the independence war yet later became vocal critics of the post-independence state. Many Eritreans view foreign narratives with suspicion, believing their country is judged without proper recognition of its security challenges.

Additionally, the government has successfully cultivated nationalism rooted in self-reliance and re-

sistance to external pressure. In a region marked by foreign interventions and political instability, this message retains emotional power.

This does not invalidate criticisms of repression. But it explains why the EPLF's historical legitimacy remains resilient among parts of the population.

Nevertheless, the central dilemma remains unresolved: can a state built through militarised liberation ever fully demilitarise itself?

Eritrea's leadership long governed as though independence remained under constant siege. Some of those fears were grounded in reality. Yet permanent mobilisation carries enormous social costs. Innovation suffers. Political institutions stagnate. Young people lose faith in the future.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that the EPLF succeeded spectacularly in achieving national independence but struggled to create the political openness many Eritreans hoped independence would bring. Liberation from external domination did not necessarily produce liberation from internal control.

The legacy of the EPLF resists simplistic judgement because it contains two truths simultaneously.

First, the movement achieved something historically remarkable. Against immense odds, it defeated a larger and heavily armed regime, secured Eritrean independence and created a sovereign state where many believed none would exist. That achievement cannot honestly be erased or dismissed.

Second, the post-independence state that emerged has been marked by authoritarianism, indefinite conscription and severe restrictions on political freedom. Those realities are equally undeniable.

Too often, discussions about Eritrea collapse into caricature. One side romanticises the liberation struggle while ignoring repression. The other reduces the entire movement to dictatorship and overlooks the historical conditions that produced it.

History is rarely so neat. The EPLF's story is ultimately a warning as much as an inspiration. It demonstrates the extraordinary power of collective sacrifice and national determination. But it also illustrates how revolutionary movements, once victorious, can become trapped by the very structures that enabled their survival during war.

The heroic narrative and the authoritarian reality are not separate stories. They are chapters of the same history.

Asmara's silent streets

In the highlands of the Horn of Africa, the city of Asmara still carries the visual echoes of a different political imagination. Its Italian-era modernist architecture, clean lines, faded pastel façades, wide boulevards, once seemed to promise a future of openness after decades of war. When Eritrea finally emerged as an independent state following the Eritrean War of Independence, the mood in Asmara was one of hard-won triumph. Streets filled with celebration and a liberation generation, those who had fought, supported, or grown up in the shadow of war, imagined a nation rebuilt on sacrifice, unity, and dignity.

More than three decades later, that optimism has not so much vanished as been redirected. Under the

long rule of President Isaias Afwerki, the promise of liberation has hardened into a system defined by permanent national service, tight political control and mass emigration. The story of Asmara today is not one of collapse, but of transformation: from a city of celebration into one of quiet endurance.

Eritrea's independence was unusual in Africa's post-colonial history. It was not granted, but fought for over three decades. That legacy matters deeply in understanding the political culture that followed. The state's founding narrative emphasised vigilance, unity, and the necessity of discipline to protect sovereignty from external threats.

In the early years of independence, many citizens accepted extraordinary measures as temporary sacrifices. National service was introduced as a pillar of reconstruction: a system intended to build infrastructure, consolidate national identity, and ensure military readiness. At first, it was framed as civic duty in a fragile new state still wary of renewed conflict with Ethiopia.

However, what was designed as a transitional mechanism gradually became a permanent feature of life. Over time, the boundaries between military service, civilian labour, and state employment blurred.

For many Eritreans, national service is not a phase of life but a condition of it, open-ended, often indefinite and deeply structuring of social and economic existence.

The transformation of national service into a near-universal life structure is one of the defining features of modern Eritrea. Young people are often assigned roles that extend far beyond military duties: teaching, construction, administrative work, agricultural projects, and public services. In theory, this is nation-building. In practice, critics argue it has become a system that regulates mobility, limits economic independence, and shapes the trajectory of entire generations.

Asmara, once imagined as a capital of renewal, reflects this reality in its rhythms. The city is orderly, even calm, but this calm can feel less like stability and more like containment. Public life is structured, visible, and carefully managed. The absence of overt political pluralism contributes to a sense of predictability that is often interpreted differently depending on perspective: as either stability or stagnation.

For the liberation generation, those early ideals of collective sacrifice have become intertwined with a more complex reality. Many who fought for indepen-

dence now watch their children enter a system they themselves helped establish, but which has evolved in ways they may not have anticipated.

Alongside national service, another defining feature of Eritrea's modern social structure is emigration. Large numbers of young Eritreans leave the country, often undertaking perilous journeys through the Horn of Africa and across the Mediterranean. This migration is not simply economic; it is structural. It reflects the tension between a tightly regulated domestic system and the aspirations of a globally connected generation.

Diaspora communities now form a significant extension of Eritrean society. Remittances support families, and exile has become an informal escape valve for a system that otherwise offers limited mobility. Yet departure is not a clean break. The emotional and political ties to home remain strong, complicated by expectations of loyalty, contributions, and sometimes taxation imposed on citizens abroad.

The result is a fragmented national experience: one country, but multiple lived realities. Inside Eritrea, life is shaped by duty and continuity. Outside, it is often defined by opportunity and distance but also by unresolved attachment.

At the centre of this system is the state's emphasis on continuity. Under Isaias Afwerki's leadership, governance has been marked by an insistence on sovereignty, self-reliance, and resistance to external pressure. From this perspective, Eritrea's policies are framed not as restriction, but as protection, an attempt to preserve independence in a volatile regional environment.

Supporters of this approach argue that Eritrea has avoided some of the fragmentation and instability seen elsewhere in the region. They point to infrastructure development, literacy gains, and the maintenance of national cohesion despite economic hardship and international isolation.

Critics, however, see a different picture: a political system where institutional flexibility is limited, where long-term service obligations constrain individual autonomy, and where political space is tightly controlled. The tension between these interpretations is central to understanding Eritrea's present condition.

Walking through Asmara today, one is struck less by visible unrest than by stillness. Cafés operate quietly, schools function, government buildings maintain their rhythms. Yet beneath this surface order lies a deeper sense of suspension, a feeling that time itself

has been held in place since the moment of independence.

This silence is not absence. It is structured. It reflects a political system that prioritises stability over pluralism, continuity over disruption. For some citizens, this produces security and coherence. For others, it generates a sense of unrealised potential.

Architecture in Asmara becomes a metaphor for this condition. The city's preserved modernist buildings, recognised internationally for their historical value, stand as reminders of earlier futures imagined but never fully pursued. They are beautiful, but also static, frozen in a moment that no longer evolves.

Perhaps the most significant shift in Eritrea today is generational. Those who experienced the liberation struggle often interpret the present through the lens of sacrifice and survival. The younger generation, however, has grown up in a different reality, one where national service is not an extraordinary contribution to nation-building, but the default condition of adulthood.

This divergence creates a subtle but persistent tension. One generation sees continuity as protection of hard-won sovereignty. The other experiences it as

constraint on personal trajectory. Between them lies a widening gap in expectations, language, and aspiration.

It would be simplistic to describe Eritrea solely in terms of restriction or hardship. National pride remains deeply embedded in the country's identity. The memory of independence is not abstract; it is lived, commemorated, and emotionally significant. Many citizens express genuine attachment to the idea of the nation and its resilience.

At the same time, there is visible fatigue. The long duration of national service, the limited space for political expression, and the sustained scale of emigration all suggest a society negotiating the limits of endurance. The question is not whether Eritrea has achieved sovereignty, it has but what sovereignty now demands of its citizens.

The story of Eritrea is not one of simple contradiction between success and failure. It is a story of historical momentum that has not fully resolved into a stable endpoint. The liberation generation achieved what few believed possible: independence after decades of war. Yet the system built in its aftermath has taken on a life of its own.

In Asmara, Eritrea, the quiet streets embody this paradox. They are neither chaotic nor entirely free, neither collapsing nor fully flourishing. Instead, they exist in a condition of suspended transformation.

Whether this represents stability or stagnation depends on perspective. But what is clear is that Eritrea's post-liberation identity remains unfinished. The hopes of the past have not disappeared, they have been reorganised into structures of service, migration, and state continuity. And in that reorganisation lies the defining tension of the present: a nation still shaped by the revolution that created it, yet still searching for what comes after.



When guerrillas win

There is a familiar arc in modern political history: a guerrilla movement, forged in the crucible of war, defeats a stronger state and inherits the machinery of governance it once fought against. The transition is often celebrated as the culmination of a national struggle. Yet in practice, it is frequently the beginning of a different kind of crisis, one in which liberation gives way to consolidation, and revolutionary legitimacy hardens into political monopoly.

Few cases illustrate this trajectory more starkly than the transformation of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front into the ruling apparatus of the state of Eritrea under President Isaias Afwerki. For modern secessionist or rebel movements, the Eritrean expe-

rience offers a cautionary tale: military victory is not the same thing as democratic governance, and the skills required to win a war are not those required to build a pluralist state.

The EPLF emerged in the 1970s as one of several armed groups resisting Ethiopian rule over Eritrea. It distinguished itself through discipline, ideological cohesion, and an unusually sophisticated parallel governance structure in liberated zones. Schools were run, taxes were collected, and rudimentary administrative systems were built even before independence was achieved in 1993.

This dual identity, both army and proto-state, was central to its success. But it also contained the seeds of its post-war governance style. The same centralised command structure that proved effective on the battlefield became the blueprint for the new state.

When independence came, there was no serious rival institution to the EPLF. It had not merely defeated an external enemy; it had absorbed or eliminated most internal political competition. In 1994 it formally rebranded itself as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, but in practice it remained the same tightly controlled organisation.

Rebel movements that win long wars tend to develop a particular political psychology. First, there is the belief in exclusive legitimacy: having sacrificed more than any other group, they see themselves as uniquely entitled to govern. Second, there is the habit of secrecy and hierarchy, which becomes difficult to dismantle once the war ends. Third, there is a deep suspicion of pluralism, often equated with fragmentation or vulnerability.

In Eritrea's case, these tendencies hardened into a system where political dissent was not merely discouraged but structurally impossible. Elections were postponed indefinitely, independent media closed, and political opposition outlawed. The state became an extension of the liberation army's organisational culture.

This is not unique to Eritrea. Many revolutionary movements struggle with the transition from insurgency to governance. The battlefield rewards unity of command; democratic governance requires negotiation, compromise, and institutional restraint. Where those habits are absent, centralisation tends to persist long after the war has ended.

One of the central paradoxes of guerrilla success is that the very qualities that ensure military surviv-

al can undermine political legitimacy. Cohesion becomes exclusion. Discipline becomes coercion. Loyalty becomes a substitute for accountability.

In Eritrea, the EPLF's wartime structures were not dismantled after independence; they were scaled up. The party-state fused military, political, and administrative authority into a single hierarchy. Over time, this made institutional reform nearly impossible, because reform would have required dismantling the very organisation that had secured independence.

The result was stagnation. What had once been a highly adaptive guerrilla force became an inflexible governing apparatus. Decision-making concentrated at the top, while civil institutions remained weak or purely symbolic.

In the early 1990s, Eritrea was widely admired. It was seen as a rare African success story: a disciplined liberation movement that had defeated a much larger army and achieved independence without external intervention. International donors and observers were inclined to give the new government the benefit of the doubt.

This goodwill proved politically significant. It reduced external pressure for democratisation at a crit-

ical formative stage. The assumption that liberation movements naturally evolve into democratic governments turned out to be misplaced.

For many secessionist or revolutionary movements today, this remains a seductive narrative: that legitimacy earned in war will automatically translate into legitimacy in peace. Eritrea demonstrates otherwise. Wartime legitimacy is not self-renewing; it decays unless it is replaced by institutional legitimacy.

Across the world, from armed independence movements to insurgent regional groups, the question remains pressing: what happens after victory?

Several lessons emerge from the Eritrean experience:

1. Do not confuse unity with governance. Military unity is essential in war, but governance requires pluralism. A movement that suppresses internal dissent during the struggle will find it difficult to tolerate external dissent afterwards.

2. Build institutions before victory, not after it. The EPLF did build administrative structures during the war, but these were subordinate to military command. Effective post-conflict governance requires

institutions that are independent of the armed hierarchy.

3. Plan for demilitarisation early.

One of the hardest transitions is converting a liberation army into a civilian political actor. Without deliberate planning, the military structure tends to dominate the state indefinitely.

4. Avoid the myth of permanent revolution.

Revolutionary identity can become a justification for indefinite emergency rule. Once the logic of existential struggle is extended into peacetime, democratic normalisation becomes increasingly unlikely.

Eritrea is not an isolated case. Across the post-colonial world, several liberation movements have struggled with the same transition. In some cases, they have evolved into dominant-party systems; in others, they have fragmented or returned to conflict.

What makes the Eritrean example distinctive is the degree to which the liberation movement and the state became indistinguishable. The boundary between wartime mobilisation and peacetime governance never fully formed. As a result, political life remained frozen in a logic of struggle long after the struggle itself had ended.

The story of the EPLF's transformation into the governing structure of Eritrea is often told as a story of national achievement. But it is equally a story of institutional substitution: a liberation army did not step aside to allow a political system to emerge; it became the political system.

For contemporary secessionist and rebel movements, this is the central warning. Winning a war is not the same as building a state. In fact, the skills required for each may be fundamentally at odds.

If there is a final lesson from Eritrea, it is that liberation is not an endpoint. It is a beginning, one that demands a willingness to relinquish the habits of war in favour of the slow, often frustrating discipline of democratic governance. Without that transition, victory risks becoming permanent stagnation rather than genuine freedom.



Self-determination as a double-edged sword

In 1993, the world witnessed what appeared to be a rare moment of clean historical closure. After three decades of brutal conflict, famine, and shifting Cold War alliances, the people of Eritrea voted overwhelmingly in a UN-supervised referendum for independence from Ethiopia. The result, formally 99.8% in favour, was greeted internationally as the consummation of a principle long embedded in post-war global order: the right of peoples to self-determination.

Yet in hindsight, Eritrea's referendum stands less as an endpoint than as a warning. It raises an uncomfortable question: when does self-determination

resolve a conflict, and when does it simply repackage power, freezing political life into a new, more locally legitimate authoritarian structure? This is the referendum trap.

There is no denying the moral force behind Eritrea's claim to statehood. Annexed by Ethiopia in 1962 after a UN federation arrangement collapsed, Eritrea entered one of Africa's longest wars of liberation. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fought a disciplined, ideologically driven insurgency against successive Ethiopian governments, culminating in victory in 1991 after the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

By the time the referendum arrived two years later, the outcome was never in serious doubt. The EPLF, later rebranded as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), had become the dominant political, military, and administrative authority in Eritrea. Independence was not only desired; it was structurally pre-decided.

In that sense, Eritrea represents self-determination at its most unambiguous. A people widely recognised as distinct, long mobilised under a coherent nationalist project, and finally given international sanction to formalise what had already been achieved on the

battlefield. For a world still shaped by colonial legacies, this looked like justice delayed but delivered.

But the assumption embedded in the 1993 referendum, that independence equals resolution, has proven dangerously simplistic. The Eritrean case reveals that referendums can close one conflict only by suppressing the political complexity that follows.

Within a few years of independence, Eritrea's liberation movement transformed into a rigid one-party state. Elections promised in the transitional constitution never materialised. Political opposition was not merely marginalised but eliminated. The press was shut down. Civil society was absorbed or dissolved. National service became indefinite in practice, creating a system often described by critics as a form of state-controlled labour conscription.

In effect, the liberation movement did not transition into pluralistic governance; it crystallised into permanent rule. The irony is stark. A struggle fought in the name of freedom produced a state where freedom became tightly circumscribed.

Referendums are seductive instruments in conflict resolution. They offer clarity where politics is messy. They compress years or decades of violence into a

single binary question: yes or no, independence or unity, separation or continuation.

But this clarity is precisely what makes them fragile as tools of long-term settlement. In deeply militarised societies, particularly those emerging from liberation wars, the act of voting does not necessarily reflect plural political will. It often reflects the dominance of the victorious faction, the exhaustion of populations, and the absence of viable alternatives.

Eritrea in 1993 was not a competitive democracy deciding its constitutional future. It was a post-war society governed by a victorious movement that controlled the narrative, the security apparatus, and the institutional framework of transition.

The referendum, therefore, functioned less as an open-ended democratic choice and more as ratification of an already established political order.

This is the essence of the referendum trap: it transforms military victory into moral legitimacy, and moral legitimacy into long-term political immunity.

The deeper issue lies in how liberation movements understand themselves after victory. Many revolutionary or secessionist organisations carry within

them a powerful narrative of historical completion: the idea that once independence is achieved, the political project is fulfilled.

But states do not end with independence; they begin there. In Eritrea, the EPLF's wartime discipline and cohesion translated into post-independence centralisation. The same structures that had enabled survival in guerrilla war, tight command, ideological unity, intolerance of dissent, became governing principles.

This is not unique to Eritrea. Many post-liberation states struggle with the transition from movement to government. What makes Eritrea distinctive is the degree to which the liberation identity never dissolved into plural politics.

Instead, independence became a justification for permanence, the revolution had delivered the state, therefore the state must preserve the revolution.

This logic is politically self-sealing. Opposition becomes betrayal of independence itself. Dissent becomes existential threat. And the referendum, once the symbol of liberation, becomes retrospective validation of a system that resists change.

Perhaps the most tragic consequence of Eritrea's independence was not internal stagnation but renewed interstate war. In 1998, only five years after secession, Eritrea and Ethiopia plunged into a devastating border conflict that killed tens of thousands.

What had been framed as a clean break between two states instead revealed unresolved territorial disputes, economic interdependence, and deep psychological scars from decades of shared struggle.

Here again, the referendum trap becomes visible. By treating independence as an endpoint, the international community underestimated the complexity of post-separation state formation. The assumption was that sovereignty would stabilise relations. Instead, it hardened them.

The Eritrea–Ethiopia war demonstrated that self-determination does not eliminate historical entanglement; it often reconfigures it into new forms of rivalry.

For external actors, referendums are appealing because they appear to offer ethical neutrality. The people decide; outsiders merely facilitate. But this procedural fairness can obscure substantive inequalities.

In cases like Eritrea, the international community effectively validated a single dominant actor as the legitimate representative of “the people.” Once that validation is granted, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to revisit questions of governance, accountability, or internal dissent without appearing to challenge the principle of self-determination itself.

This creates a paradox. The more decisively a referendum settles the question of independence, the less room remains to question the nature of the state that emerges from it. Self-determination, in this sense, can become self-entrenchment.

It would be too simplistic to argue that all independence referendums are flawed. There are cases where they have helped defuse conflict and establish durable settlements. But the conditions matter profoundly.

Referendums are most likely to succeed when:

- there is genuine political pluralism beforehand;
- no single armed actor dominates the process;
- institutions capable of post-vote accountability already exist;

- and independence is accompanied by constitutional guarantees of internal democracy.

Where these conditions are absent, referendums risk legitimising the outcome of force rather than the expression of choice.

Eritrea illustrates the latter scenario. The vote was clear, but clarity is not the same as contestation. And without contestation, political systems struggle to renew themselves.

The Eritrean experience is not merely a regional story; it is a warning relevant far beyond the Horn of Africa. From separatist movements in Europe to contested regions in Asia, the idea of a single decisive vote remains politically attractive.

But history suggests that independence is rarely a final act. It is a transition into new forms of negotiation, about power, identity, borders, and governance. When referendums are treated as endpoints rather than beginnings, they risk freezing political evolution at the moment of maximal consensus or maximal control. In that frozen moment lies the trap.

Eritrea's 1993 referendum remains, on paper, one of the clearest expressions of self-determination in modern history. But clarity is not the same as resolution. Independence ended one war, but it also inaugurated a political order that has proven resistant to reform and insulated from internal challenge.

The lesson is not that self-determination is illegitimate. It is that it is incomplete. A referendum can decide a question of sovereignty. It cannot, on its own, build a political culture capable of sustaining freedom after the flags are raised and the votes are counted.

The danger of the referendum trap is not that people are asked to decide their future. It is that we assume, once they have decided, that the future has already been secured.



Eritrea Confronts Ethiopia

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“Unless peace, justice and prosperity prevail...
the independence we won will be meaningless”

ERITREA CONFRONTS ETHIOPIA

Ovi History



Studying human history is the process of examining recorded events, while learning it involves internalizing broader patterns and lessons. History reveals the rise and fall of civilizations, technological revolutions, and cultural shifts, helping us understand present-day societies. By analyzing past triumphs, mistakes, and conflicts, we gain perspective on human nature and avoid repeating errors. This knowledge fosters empathy across different eras and regions, reminding us that our shared heritage is a complex tapestry of innovation, struggle and resilience.

